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MOKE HORNER, THE BOSS ROUSTABOUT;

Or, The Fresh-Water Sharks
of the Overflow.

A ROMANCE OF MISSISSIPPI RIVER LIFE.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA JOE," "JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," "PACIFIC PETE," "OLD '49,"
"THREE-FINGERED JACK," "THE LONG-HAIRED PARDS," "JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE KING," ETC., ETC.



LEANING OVER THE END OF THE LOG, MOKE DRAGGED HIM UP UNTIL HIS FACE WAS CLEAR OF THE WATER.

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CHAPTER I.

A "HOODOO 'COON."

"Wh' is I? An' it's you dat's axin'—you taffy-colored tub o' soap-grease? G'way, you yaller niggah, wid you' foolishin' an' monkey-shines! Wh' is I? De—good—Lawd!"

"Dat's jes' what I say; wh' is you, anyway? A lamp-black niggah, wid jay-bird heel an' crooked shins, trivin' to put on scallops ober common folks! Wh' is ye, an' whar'd ye come from, a-swellin' an' a-struttin' an' a-gobblin' wuss dan a ole turkey-cock in trompin'-time? Dat's my sarmon, it is!"

In strong and comical contrast were the two worthies whose words are recorded above; one tall the other short; one fat and clumsy, the other "built from the ground up," an athlete done in ebony.

Who and what were they?

Two-score years ago there was not a building in all New Orleans that was better known or more popular, among a certain class, than the saloon of Pere Godet, "The Tri-color."

It was an old building then, and to-day it does not look a whit more dingy or disreputable than on that fair spring evening in the year of grace, 1844. But there is a difference, for all that. Then it stood almost the only representative of its class, while now its counterpart in all essential particulars may be met with on almost any street where Bacchus is king.

The little, dried-up Creole had but one god; and those who knew him best said that the Tri-color stood for red, white and yellow—copper, silver and gold. And it was to capture the humble coin of the colored population, as well as the more valuable tokens of his paler customers, that Pere Godet conceived the idea of running a double saloon, one-half of which should be sacred to the pale-faces, while the other, with an entrance on another street, served for the negroes.

A frail partition divided the room in two parts, the bar running at right angles with the dividing line, giving room behind the counter for Pere Godet or his assistant to pass from one portion of the saloon to the other without the pains of opening doors, two of which, swinging loosely on reversible hinges, and hung with figured chintz, formed a portion of the division wall.

The building itself was situated not far from the steamboat wharf, for Pere Godet catered almost exclusively for the river men and rougher classes, though an occasional party of "bloods" would drop in, on a "lark," to take a brief taste of "life on the lower level."

On the evening in question, the Tricolor was unusually well patronized, both sections of the saloon being full, particularly that portion devoted to "gentlemen of color." Several steamboats had landed at New Orleans that afternoon, and the river-men were anxious to "wet their wages" as fast and as thoroughly as possible.

Laughing, singing, joking, cutting up shines and playing tricks on each other, the negroes had been enjoying themselves without stint. Plenty of whisky and "turpentine-gin" before them, with the means in their pockets to secure enough of the fiery poison to "make drunk come," what negro of that day could ask for more? Yet it was all good-natured; all sport and no malice, even when their horse-play grew roughest.

Prominent among the party, gayest and most tricky of all, was a fat, roly-poly mulatto. Rollicking good-nature oozed out at every pore of his shining countenance, in every twinkle of his fat-imbued eyes, and each note of his peculiar voice. This, in itself, was as "good as a circus," being apparently wholly beyond the control of the owner, ranging from deepest bass to shrillest falsetto, running the gamut with most astonishing irregularity, and imparting a comic flavor to what might otherwise have fallen flat and stale.

Yellow Jack, as he had called himself, was a stranger to nearly every one present when he entered the Tricolor, but before a half-hour passed by, he was hand-in-glove with them one and all. What he lacked in altitude, he made up in breadth and width, being naturally very stoutly built, and now a very mountain of fat. Ragged, greasy and dirty; bare-footed and hatless; yet he had silver in his pockets and could spend it freely as the best.

His eyes were very small, jet-black and keen as thorns. His flattened nose was almost lost between two huge cheeks that shook and quivered with his every motion. His mouth was enormous, turning up at the corners with a comical twist. A few tiny spirals of crispy wool were scattered over the top of his skull, but at a casual glance, one would have pronounced him absolutely bald-headed.

While the crowd was roaring at one of the sallies born of Yellow Jack Tandy, the outer door swung open, and a single man entered the saloon with a dignified strut, waving one be-ringed hand toward the barkeeper with lofty condescension, the gesture serving the double purpose of a salutation and an order for refreshments. Leaning lightly against the bar, the new-comer coolly gazed around the congregation, a barely perceptible nod acknowledging the few salutations which greeted him.

His skin was black and glossy as polished ebony; but that and his manner of speech alone reminded one of his nativity.

His features were regular and clean-cut. His nose was straight and thin, neither flattened nor widened at the nostrils. Though of generous size, his mouth was duly proportioned and his lips thin. His forehead was high and prominent, while his head was well balanced, as far as could be seen for the crispy, wavy, well-oiled locks with which it was generously covered. A heavy mustache covered his upper lip, meeting and uniting with flowing whiskers which covered his jowls, leaving his rounded chin clean shorn. But the particular which naturally attracted the closest attention from those who met this peculiar character for the first time, lay in the negro's eyes: the irises were of a deep, yet bright blue.

A trifle over six feet in height, and weighing in the neighborhood of two hundred pounds, this peculiar-looking gentleman of color, was rigged out in a suit of light-blue cottonade, fresh and spotless as though just from the tailor. His linen was snowy white, and the carefully fluted frills which filled his broad bosom were miracles of stiffness; ditto the long-eared collar that encircled his sinewy throat. A flaming red cravat; a huge glass and brass pin; a beaver, carefully brushed, but still showing signs of long service; white cotton gloves on the brawny hands; massive hoop ear-rings in each perforated lobe, and rings on full one-half of his fingers, of brass and silver, one being carved from bone, with a well-executed skull for crest; all this, together with his supercilious air and lofty condescension, seemed to nettle the jolly fat mulatto, quickly leading to the interchange of words with which this chapter opens.

"Wh' is I?" repeated the colored dandy, in a tone of languid surprise that an answer should be deemed necessary. "I's a bad man, I is, when I turns on de steam. I takes a straight chute an' nebber stop fo' towheads, shoals or snags. I don't!"

"Wh' is I? I's Moke Horner, de Boss Roustabout, an' I own de Massissip clean from spring to salt water! I's de king chew-chew ob de ribber, wid alligator keel, catfish b'iler, a snap-pin-turtle in de pilot-house, an' I kerry de broom up atween my smoke-stacks—I des does, honey!"

"De good Lawd! ef he cain't talk!" gasped Yellow Tandy, with a ludicrous assumption of wonder and awe that drew a subdued chuckle from more than one of those who had fallen aside to give the colored dandy full swing.

But not a smile was to be seen on any face as Moke Horner cast his keen blue eyes around with a ferocious scowl. For some cause or other, the negroes held him in healthy awe.

"Moke Horner I is, des in wid a pocketful ob rocks, head full o' music an' heels des a-runnin' ober wid double-shuffle an' pigeon-wings! I liles my runnin'-gear wid chain-lightnin' an' gits up steam wid gol' an' silber—des so!"

Cocking the rusty beaver over one eye, Moke Horner plunged his right hand to the elbow in his pocket, drawing forth a number of coins, which he tossed into the air in swift succession, catching the glittering shower with rare dexterity in his capacious mouth as the coins descended, giving hasty gulps as though swallowing them. Where else they went, if not into his stomach, not one of the eager watchers could have explained with any certainty.

But Yellow Tandy was not to be so easily put down.

"Hoo! dat's nuffin," with a desperate attempt to turn his nose up, despite nature. "Des watch dis nig—" and he hastily fumbled in pocket after pocket among his fluttering rags. "De good Lawd! ef I didn't leabe my pu's at home on de pianny! Des len' me a han'ful o' dem 'ar—"

"G'way, you yaller trash!" with a scornful wave of the skull-adorned hand. "I's a hoodoo 'coon, I is! I wu'k de rabbit-foot on you—fore de good Lawd I'll done it, now!"

Nothing if not superstitious, the negroes fell further away from the last speaker, for of all varieties of "conjuring," there is none more potent or dangerous, in their estimation, than that of "the rabbit-foot." Even Yellow Tandy turned a shade lighter, and fell back a pace, but as quickly rallied.

"Hoo! who keer fo' de yabbitt-foot? Not dis niggah, while he tote dis yere!" lugging out a little bag from where it hung around his neck by a string, both dirty from long wear and shining with grease. "G'way wid you' yabbitt-foot! I's cunjerman too, I is—way up hoo-doo—"

A mocking laugh cut his shrill treble short, and Tandy hastily retreated a few steps as Moke Horner advanced, drawing a small package from his bosom and shaking it at him.

There was a stern frown on the face of the colored dandy now, and all trace of languidness had vanished. His blue eyes glittered like coals of living fire, and his white teeth became visible below his jetty mustaches, while his voice rung out clear and menacing:

"You cunjerman? You laugh at de rabbit-foot? You know hoodoo? You—a pore white trash dat de debble ketch by de heel an' soused in a tub o' sulphur, den sent up yere fer to do shame to de colored people? You, dat ain't neider fish, flesh nor yit wegitable? Fore de good Lawd! I's a mind to show you what de rabbit-foot is!"

In his white-gloved and ring-adorned hand the rabbit-foot quivered, wrapped round with red flannel and tied with many a fold of string.

Yellow Jack Tandy eyed it with evident uneasiness, but still clung to his faith in his "cunjering-bag."

"G'way, you jay-bird-feddered monkey—g'way! I ain't got time to fool wid sech low trash, or I'd show you whar de yabbitt-foot comes in. Caint tetch dis nig while I shake dis at um—snake-rattle, dead man's toenail, bit o' hangin' rope—"

"You will hab it, den?" and Moke Horner drew his fine figure up to its utmost height, his blue eyes glowing, his white teeth grating; then he held the rabbit-foot between his hollowed palms, breathing upon the red package, mumbling in low tones, his eyes all the time riveted upon the face of his doubting rival.

Yellow Tandy clutched his charm-bag more tightly, but for all that it was plain enough that he was growing uneasy as he closely watched the movements of his rival.

Scarcely less anxious were the other negroes with their inborn superstition fully aroused as they watched the twain. And the curtain which hung over one of the doors between the two sections of the saloon was now pushed aside, and the faces of three white men might have been seen peering curiously into the part set aside for the colored race.

With a swift motion, Moke Horner shook his rabbit-foot at the mulatto, crying sharply:

"Put dat cunjerman-bag back in you' buzzom, boy! It's de rabbit-foot dat speaks frough my lips! Put it back, you!"

"Deed I des won't!" muttered Tandy, but at the same time, like one obeying a superior will, his trembling fingers thrust the charm back into his bosom.

The scowl vanished from the brows of the negro as he noted this prompt obedience, and there was a trace of good-natured ridicule in his mellow tones as he added:

"You young yit, yaller boy, an' you' bringin' up ain't so much to blame, after all, an' I's gwine fer to let ye off easy dis time. You'll do better when you come to know what de rabbit-foot is able to do in de han's ob dem what kin bring out all its wartues."

"Yabbitt-foot humbug—cain't tetch my cunjerman-bag!"

Like one speaking in a dream, Yellow Tandy muttered these words, not a muscle of his fat face changing as he stared with lack-luster eyes at the Boss Roustabout. Awe-stricken the other negroes looked on, not one among their number doubting for an instant but that the impious scoffer was wholly at the mercy of the mighty charm which his unconscious tongue was even then reviling.

"Humbug, hey?" grinned Moke Horner, mischief dancing in his blue eyes. "We see what sort o' humbug purty soon. You yaller 'coon—look right dis way—so!"

"Won't do it—humbug—I hoodoo 'coon too, I is?" squeaked Tandy, but facing fairly around and staring the conjurer fully in the face.

"Rabbit-foot talkin' now, yaller boy!" rumbled the Boss Roustabout in his deepest tones. "Rabbit-foot say treat a fool like a fool. Rabbit-foot say git down on you' knees!"

"Deed an' double deed I des won't!" drawled Tandy, at the same time belying himself by dropping on his hunkers.

"It's a rabbit-foot dat says it, boy!" continued Moke Horner, after a patronizing glance around upon the wondering blacks, and showing his teeth in a grim smile as he noted their sable hue growing ashy and heard their strong teeth begin to chatter like men with the ague.

"It's rabbit-foot dat tells you to turn wrong eend up'ards now. Hist dem 'ar' toad-squashers ef dey tum'le ober an' break you' fool' neck!"

At this shameful demand, Tandy tried to rebel, shaking his head until his fat cheeks swayed back and forth as he looked up at his master, his little eyes almost popping out of their sockets; but Moke Horner stepped a pace nearer, stooping and shaking the potent charm full in the upturned face, and with a groaning pro-

test, Tandy lowered his bald head to the sanded floor.

With many a grunt and gasping groan; with many a futile effort he tried to obey the stern commands of the rabbit-foot; but with a doleful lack of success that drew oily chuckles of half-frightened delight from the huge lips of the watching blacks, and resulted in a loud chorus of laughter from the trio of white men in the curtained doorway.

"Deed I des can't do it—I won't do it, so dar!" he at length groaned, gaspingly, as he made a move to regain his feet.

But he was not to escape so cheaply. Moke Horner shook the rabbit-foot over him, muttering in a deep, sepulchral tone some gibberish or words in an unknown language. Seemingly subdued, Tandy made one more desperate effort. Moke shook the rabbit-foot over him. The huge, flat feet rose spasmodically in the air, and then the yellow boy stood on his head in the center of the floor, his fat cheeks completely shutting off his eyesight, his rage fluttering as his mountain of fat quivered under the severe strain.

"You can't an' you wouldn't—but you did!" laughed Moke Horner, drawing back, waving his empty hand as though to remove the potent spell. "An' it's de rabbit-foot dat done it all. It holded you up, an' now it takes 'way its 'fluence, ober you tum'le like a bu'sted tub o' soap-grease!"

With a force that shook the whole building, Tandy fell over on his back, muttering huskily:

"Yabbit-foot ole humbug! I hoodoo 'coon too, I is!"

At the chorus of laughter which burst from the spectators he rose to a sitting position, staring vacantly around. Then the humiliating truth seemed to burst upon his befogged brain, and scrambling to his feet, he turned tremblingly toward Moke:

"Take it off—take off de 'pell, boss! Fo' de good Lawd's sake, uncunjer me, an' I'll nebber mo' say nuffin' 'g'in' de yabbit-foot—so help me hebbently Moses!"

"Den you gib in dat de rabbit-foot ain't humbug?" grinned the Boss Roustabout, slipping the package into his breast.

"Deed I des does, boss! Cunjer-bag no 'count 'longside dat 'ar charm! I gwine to git yabbit-foot des as soon's I kin—mebbe you sell dat one!" eagerly uttered the yellow boy.

"F' you got de money, yas," was the prompt reply. "I got heap mo' when dat's gone. I know de cunjer-man dat makes 'em. I sated his life, some time ago, an' he gibs me all I kin tote ef I want. Hyar it is, gen'lemen!" and Moke Horner held the charm above his head where all could see it. "De ginewine rabbit-foot, full vartue, made strong as de best hoodoo man in de worl' could fix it up. Kerry dis, an' nebber git drowned. Ef you hab inemy, he you' meat, 'long's you tote dis little bit o' medicine. You see yallar gal dat take you' fancy, she come to you like b'ar to honey-tree when you des shake dis at um. You want to ruffle de pasteboards fo' big money, des breathe soft on de ole rabbit-foot, an' den go in you' whull len'th, fo' dey ain't no common luck gwine fo' to shet ye out den."

"All dis an' a pow'ful heap mo' de rabbit-foot kin do—an' de biggest money takes it yight now! Who's a-shoutin'?"

Those keen blue eyes saw hands fumbling in pockets as though to take stock of the amounts therein, and abruptly brought his remarks to a conclusion. But he had said enough. Each and every one of the excited negroes were eager to possess the treasure, and in a chorus they named the price they were willing, or rather able to pay for it.

Into the hand of the highest bidder Moke Horner placed the rabbit-foot, then produced another and another from his well-stocked bosom, until the last bidder was supplied. Then with a generosity and magnanimity that drew cheers from the blacks, he produced still another and presented it to Yellow Jack Tandy, who fairly blubbered with joy as he accepted it.

"Tain't de money I keers fo'," said the Boss Roustabout, nodding to the barkeeper to set out his bottles. "It's de doin' good to my feller-critters. Drink hearty, gen'lemen!"

CHAPTER II.

MOKE HORNER, THE BOSS ROUSTABOUT.

PROUD as country politicians basking in the rare smiles of the member from their "destrict," the negroes flocked to the bar, laughing at the slightest sign of a jest from the lips of the "cunjer-man," and the most obsequious of them all was Yaller Jack Tandy. From a skeptic he was apparently transformed into a devotee.

No sooner were the glasses emptied than Moke Horner ordered them refilled, saying:

"Des one mo' fo' luck, gen'lemen, an' here's wishin' you nebber want de lickin' fo' to keep the channel of you' froats cl'ar ob towheads an' san'-bars!"

At a single gulp the dose of fiery "turpentine-gin" vanished down his throat, to give room to the words:

"An' now dis yer 'coon's gwine fo' ole Maum Jinny's, to git de kinks out ob he legs an' work de mildew off um heels. Who gwine 'long? You, yaller boy?"

"Wha' dar? Who dem Maum Jinny?" asked Tandy curiously.

"Who dar, you ax? De gals—de purty gals—de sweet honey gals, from brack to yaller:—dem's dar, boy! Hoo! you mighty green in O'leans, not know Maum Jinny!"

With an oily laugh, Yellow Tandy locked arms with the Boss Roustabout and turned toward the door, grunting:

"Ef plenty gals dar, dat all dis nig wants. Mebbe I hain't got sech mighty fine clo'es as you, boss, but I kerry de yabbit-foot now, an' when you see me shook um at dem yaller gals, de good Lawd! how dey des will flop 'round ole Tandy—hi-yah! hi-yah!"

As the queerly assorted couple left the saloon, the head man of the three whites dropped the curtain which until now he had held aside, and led the way back to the dingy round table from which the trio had arisen when attracted by the boisterous sounds from the other division of the Tricolor.

A slight nod conveyed his orders to the watchful *Pere Godet*, who was presiding in person this evening, and a brisk waiter quickly placed fresh glasses on the table. Though so promptly waited upon and apparently so well known, the actions of the waiter showed that either trust was unknown to the Tricolor, or else that the man who gave the order was too well known, and he only retreated when a trembling, shaking hand tossed him a yellow coin.

"A powerful 'cute game the mokes played in yonder!" the shivering man said, as he thrust the uncounted change into his pocket, taking a brief sip at his glass. "There's big money in it, if a body could only lower himself to work the oracle for all it's worth. If the whites would only bite as freely!"

"Divil a know I know what ye mane, annyhow, cap'n dear!" uttered one of the other men, wiping a dirty, ragged sleeve across his lips as he set down his hastily emptied glass. "Is it the purty thrick the black naygur played onto the yalla rowl o' soap-gr'ase?"

"And you sucked all that in, too?" scornfully laughed the man addressed as captain. "Was that why you tried to crowd by me when Moke put his rabbit-foot up at auction?"

"Divil take the red cint Purty Paddy had to bid on the same, but fer all that, wan o' them things w'd be moighty handy to kape in the house—d'ye moind that, now? When the ould 'oman breaks out in a nasty ruction, sure, cap'n, dear, couldn't I tarn her all upside down wid a teenty shake o' that noice little dubbeen over the hid av her, an' save the wear an' tear o' me fist an' blackthorn coolin' av her down?"

"If the lunk-head didn't swallow it all I'm a howling liar!" laughed the shaking man, after a wide-eyed stare into the half-abashed countenance of the stocky Irishman.

"If it was a trick, it was mighty well played," slowly uttered the third man, with a covert glance into the amused face of the first speaker.

"Then the thrick was all in the rabbit-fut," doggedly persisted the Irishman who had called himself Purty Paddy. "Sure, an' ye saw it your own sif, cap'n dear, how the yalla boy tarned ind fer ind while he said all the time he wouldn't be doin' av it—now, didn't ye, man, dear?"

"Of course I did, and I saw more than that," retorted the captain, lowering his voice a little as he noticed men at the tables nearest them glancing that way, as though attracted by the sound of their eager dispute. "This makes the third time I have seen that dandy ace of spades play the same rig, with unimportant variations; here, in St. Louis, and at Natchez under-the-Hill, when the Flora Belle was laid up for repairs after trying to root up a snag with her bow, last year."

"Then you think Moke and the yellow boy are running a rig on the darks?" asked the third man, curiously.

"I know it," was the positive reply. "I've seen the same game played by him before, I tell you. Each time he has a different partner, but it always ends after the same fashion; he peddles out rabbit-feet as long as there is a stray dollar in the crowd; then he and his partner go off together to whack up the proceeds. I'd bet big odds that were we to follow them now, we would find them dividing the spoils in some corner!"

"It wouldn't be such a bad spec," muttered the fellow, with a guarded glance around them and a cautious lowering of his tones. "The 'coon took in a good many ducats, and he seemed pretty well beeled in the first place. A nigger more or less would never be missed."

"An' thin I c'u'd try the rabbit-fut on the ould 'oman, jist fer luck!" eagerly chimed in the Irishman.

The eager, bloodthirsty look in their liquor-inflamed eyes died away as the man whom they appeared to regard as a sort of chief, slowly shook his head. Yet he did not appear greatly shocked by their ugly mutterings and uglier looks. It took a good deal to shock Captain

Joseph Baldwin, if the plain truth must be told.

Over his past life hung a cloud of mystery which even his most intimate acquaintances had never fully penetrated. For years his face and figure had been familiar along the river and in the lower levels of New Orleans, but from whence he originally came, or what his first steps along the pathway of crime, none save himself could have told; and on that point Shaky Joe, as he came to be familiarly known among the "fancy" of later years, invariably kept a close tongue.

It was known that he had "served time" in more than one State. It was strongly suspected that his hand had engineered far more ugly work than any he had ever been called upon to answer for before the bar of justice. Certain it was that those who needed a piece of dirty or dangerous work performed without personal danger or trouble, never felt any hesitation about applying to Joe Baldwin. His own hand was never actually seen in such work, but when the pay was liberal and the money sure, somehow the desired work was always promptly attended to, and Shaky Joe as certainly claimed the reward.

This last title the adventurer had gained from being a victim to that curious disease known as St. Vitus's dance. His hands were ever trembling like those of a man afflicted by a severe fit of ague. The muscles of his face twitched and jerked with a ludicrous persistency, and his thin lips kept quivering constantly, despite the habit which he had formed of almost incessantly pinching and then smoothing them with his claw-like fingers.

In figure he was tall and well shaped enough, though rather too thin for perfect symmetry. His features were tolerably regular, and he might have been called handsome, despite his gray hair and beard, only for his nervous affliction.

His garb was poor, but of a flashy order. A mock jewel flashed in his bosom, and there were equally valuable rings on his thin, white hands.

Despite the affliction which has been mentioned, Joe Baldwin was widely known among the "fancy" as an expert at any and all card games; a dead shot, a bold handler of the long "toothpick" which he invariably carried in a concealed sheath at the back of his neck, and a "bad man to tackle" in general.

His present companions were of a still lower level, being roughs and thugs of the most brutal order. One, from his name of "Purty Paddy," given him in all probability from his extreme ugliness, and his broad brogue, was plainly an Irishman of the lowest class.

His hight was not great, but his form was heavily and compactly built, his shoulders and arms being covered with great bunches of muscle, toughened and trained by his practice in the "squared circle" as a worthy "knight of the fives." His low, receding forehead, his square bulldog-like jaws, his broad cheek-bones and his ferret eyes, all were those of a true prize-fighter, and that he had passed through more than one tough combat in the ring, was evidenced by the cuts and scars which marked his face, together with his broken nose.

Purty Paddy was evidently "down on his luck," judging from his dilapidated attire and general hang-dog appearance. This might be traced back to a "double-cross," when he sold out his best backers for a stake that dazzled his covetous eyes, short sighted like the majority of his class. Deserted by those who had kept him "like a fighting cock," and for much the same purpose, Purty Paddy went rapidly down the hill, drinking a great deal too heavily for a fighting-man, and thus steadily lessening his chances of ever regaining the position which his treachery had forfeited. And now, without a dollar to bless himself with, he was ready to enter on any job no matter how evil or dangerous, for the sake of "a stake."

The third and last of the party, Teddy Huke, was of still another class, differing from both of his present comrades.

He was one of those of whom it might be said, came into the world wicked, though his parents were honest enough. He was kindly treated at home and given a fair education, but he went to the bad without an effort at self-preservation. Nothing good or pure had the slightest attraction for him, and he was a thief before he could talk plain. For lack of other victims, he would have stolen from himself. His parents did all they could to break him of his evil habits, but in vain. He robbed them until he brought them to the poorhouse, and then he turned his back on those who had brought him into the world, and struck out for himself, preying on humanity.

Short and slender in build, Teddy Huke was physically a bundle of finely tempered steel springs. A remarkable gymnast in feats which required either strength or adroitness, he might have commanded a high salary as such, instead of living from hand to mouth on the proceeds of thefts and burglaries had he so elected; but as he more than once remarked, bread honestly earned would choke him!

"We've got bigger paying business on hand

than that," said Shaky Joe, in answer to the significant hints of his associates. "If you prefer to give over a sure thing for the chance of making a stake out of those darks, all right; I can easily pick up other tools for the job on hand."

"If you'd only give a man a hint as to just what its nature is!" growled Teddy Huke, with a cunning, covert glance.

"I don't know myself," was the guarded reply. "I only know that the man who gives it is not one to pay with a stingy hand. In one word, do you stick, or pull out?"

"Stick, of course!"

"An' it's Purty Paddy that says the same, be gob!" chimed in the Irishman, adding: "But it's batin' like bloody murder I am to see the loikes o' that rabbit-fut slip out o' me tin fingers, whin it'd cost only a tap on the hid av a couple o' dirthy naygurs—an' the ould 'oman kickin' up the devil's delight ivery noight, afore Purty Paddy kin rock her to slape wid a touch av the blackthorn or a tree-ligged sthool!"

Shaky Joe uttered a low, meaning laugh as he glanced into the rueful face of the covetous Pat-lander.

"And that tap o' the head might come to your own sweet pate, Paddy. Moke Horner is a tough colt to ride, even by a man that can wear the spurs as well as you know how."

"Sure I'd double him across the knee av me, an' then t'row the two bits so high the blue-birds 'u'd build nists in 'em both afore they could come down ag'in!"

"Perhaps—not! When you try to pick up that dark, my lad, you want to spit on your fingers first. He's a mighty tough 'coon, and pure grit clean to his toe-nails. I know what I am talking about. I've seen the boy tried, and come out of places so hot that it would melt the hair off your head, my laddy-buck, without a scratch."

"I've heard of him," said Teddy Huke, cutting in more for the purpose of preventing the reply which sprung to the lips of his hot-tempered mate. "A roustabout on some of the river boats, ain't he?"

"A king of the roustabouts comes nearer the mark. Moke Horner is a power among the river-men, and really has more influence than the most skilled pilot or the smartest captain between here and head-waters."

"A bloody naygur—the loikes av him!" sniffed Paddy.

"You saw how he managed those darkies in yonder?" coolly added Shaky Joe, paying no attention to the disgusted Irishman. "Well, right there you have a hint of his peculiar powers and the real reason why his influence is so remarkable over those of his own race. He has earned the reputation of being a mighty hoodoo man, and he never suffers that belief to die out for lack of practice."

"He is bold and original, shrewd and quick-witted. He has closely studied the whims and vagaries of his race, especially those bearing on witchcraft or voodooism. He knows all the thousand-and-one charms and fetiches in which the ignorant blacks place implicit reliance, and he works their superstition for all it is worth. They believe he can hoodoo them by a simple turn of his wrist. One word from him can fill a steamboat with first-class hands, and another word will be quite sufficient to leave her deck deserted, even though the steam is up and the gang-plank drawn in for a trip up or down the river. And not a mate that runs the line dare lay so much as the weight of a finger on the darky in anger. Whether it is that the fellow really possesses more than mortal powers, I can't say, but it is a recorded fact that when Moke Horner has suffered abuse on board a boat, it never reached the end of its run without serious accident, and often total loss, before he became so well known."

"A mere coincidence, of course," laughed Huke.

"You can't get a river-man of any experience to believe that," seriously retorted Shaky Joe, speaking as though he, too, had imbibed some of the current superstition. "He can have a berth on whatever boat he fancies, and once there, he is boss. He may work or play, just as the fit strikes him, for even those officers who disbelieve in his powers, know that his influence over their crews is much beyond their own."

"Why, then, does he remain a common roustabout?"

"Because of his color. He is a free negro, but still he is a black; and who would travel on a boat that had a nigger for an officer?"

"Not Purty Paddy, sure!" muttered the sulky Irishman. "But w'u'dn't I loike to play mate fer jist wan thrip wid dat bloody naygur as a roustabout! Glory to Moses! what fun!"

"Perhaps," dryly retorted Shaky Joe. "Wait until this little job is over with, and then, when you have a stake to put up to make matters interesting, and if Moke hasn't gone up the river again, I'll try and bring you together for all you or your backers can raise."

"Sure you w'u'dn't pit your money on a naygur?"

"Against my own father, if I thought I could win it."

"That's all well enough," impatiently muttered Huke, as he twirled his empty glass on the table. "But you didn't ask us here to listen to your praises of a darky? Where's the money to come in at? Who wants us, and for what?"

"That you'll see when the proper time comes," was the cool retort. "Are you game for hot and desperate work?"

"I'm strapped, clean as a whistle. I'd wade through blood to the knees or dive into hell-fire for gold just now!"

"An' Purty Paddy's got a mouth fer the same broth, bedad! Money's the devil an' all to git, these days, an' it's me that didn't saa enough o' that same to buy a rotten pratie anny day these six weeks past, so I didn't, now!" grunted the other.

"I thought as much, when I selected you two for the job. I knew the right stuff was in you, and I wouldn't ask for any better hands where good pay calls for good work."

"Give us the pay, and I'll warrant the style of work shall suit you," confidently replied Huke, his tones guarded against being overheard by any of those at the neighboring tables.

"You won't balk if the articles call for spilling red ink, then?" added Shaky Joe.

"Not if there's gold enough to outweigh our scruples. Who is the man we are to deal with?"

"All in good time, my boy. Don't grow impatient."

"What is the work he wants done? Who is to be put out of the way—man or woman?"

"That I don't know myself—"

"Look here, you!" growled Teddy Huke, leaning across the table, his little ferret eyes glowing like hot coals. "If you are trying to run a rig on us, after this fashion, don't do it! I warn you, as man to man. It won't pay. I'm soft as silk with those who treat me right, but when I'm roughed, I know how to make my teeth meet worse than any bulldog you ever saw!"

Turning his head, Shaky Joe beckoned to the waiter, giving an order for fresh drinks. He settled back in his chair while waiting for his order to be filled, staring into the anger-pale face of the thief as steadily as his infamy would permit, not speaking a word until the liquor was brought and paid for. Then, just wetting his quivering lips with the vile compound, he spoke, low and smoothly:

"Keep your tongue between your teeth, my lad. It takes more show than you can offer to faze a hair on my head. You are here to obey orders, not ask questions. If you don't like the conditions, pull out. I can do without you, if you are independent of me. You understand?"

"Isn't what I ask fair?" muttered the thief, cooled down despite himself by those icy words. "If we are to do work, haven't we the right to know—"

"Just what I choose to let you," was the low, but sharp interruption. "In one word; do you fly the track?"

"Of course not," sulkily.

"All right; let that flea stick by the wall, then. Now to explain: All I know is this: A man who is good for whatever he promises, bade me pick out two or three good and trusty hands, who would work without questions, for big money, and wait for him here. I know nothing what he wants—*Hist!*"

He cut his explanations short, as the outer door swung open. A tall man entered, drank, lit a cigar, cast a careless glance around the room, then turned and left the saloon.

"That's our man!" muttered Shaky Joe, hastily draining his glass and arising. "Come—we must keep track of him!"

Without a word Teddy Huke and Paddy followed his example.

CHAPTER III.

A GLIMPSE OF PARADISE.

ON that same fair spring evening, but a few hours later, and in an altogether different portion of the Crescent City, certain events took place which must find a record here.

A spacious, well-arranged mansion was brilliantly lighted up from roof to basement. For an hour past stately carriages had been rolling up to the front door, pausing long enough to discharge their freight of beauty and chivalry, then making way for still others. From the open windows came the mellow notes of music, and an occasional murmuring of voices as some couple lifted the misty lace curtains which alone shut off a view of the charming interior from the few dirty and ragged beggars whom the gay sounds and brilliant visions had drawn to the rich man's portals.

For Horace Ward was universally accounted a very rich man in those days. It was frequently hinted that he could see his way clear to a position among the very few millionaires of that day, even if not actually entitled to add that magical title to his well-known name.

Few men in the South were better known than the handsome, well preserved and genial merchant and ship-owner. Many a solid business man sighed while envying "that lucky deg," and said what a great pity it was that

Horace Ward had no son to whom he might leave the flourishing business when he grew too old or too rich to care for keeping up his watchful interest. And then, with thoughts of the charming Drusilla Ward, sole child and only heiress of the wealthy merchant, they fell straightway to summing up the chances their sons or their nephews might have if duly entered for the grand stakes of beauty and bullion.

There had never been another child born to Horace and Melicent Ward than Drusilla, nor had the parents ever really felt the lack of other, though the merchant did experience an occasional pang of regret that there was none of the same name to take up his work when his time for retiring to private life should come; but that sentiment was only momentary, always vanishing before a word from the red lips of his idolized child, or one glimpse of her bright countenance.

Even had she not been heiress to such brilliant prospects, Drusilla Ward would have been considered a bright star amidst the brilliant galaxy of beauty and fashion for which the Crescent city has ever been famous. Handicapped by poverty, not even the most envious could have denied her claim to beauty of the highest order. Favored by great wealth and indulgent parents, she became the reigning star, the acknowledged belle, the most precious prize then in the matrimonial market.

Not one who beheld her then, gracefully floating over the carefully waxed and polished floor to the rise and fall of music, could have denied her right to any or all of those titles.

Just eighteen years of age, for the ball was given in commemoration of her birthday, Drusilla Ward was yet fresh and charming as a just-opening rosebud, though she had entered society when but little more than a child in years. During all that time she had had many suitors, but never a lover. But now—and he nothing but a beggarly lawyer, without name or fame!

He was her partner in this dreamy waltz, and neither Drusilla Ward nor Marcus Dineon had eyes or thoughts for the meaning glances, the significant shrugs, the whispered comments with which a certain portion of the company regarded their association. And then, when the music died away, and the gracefully-whirling couples ceased their rhythmic movements, Marcus Dineon, flushed and supremely happy, reverently led the beautiful maiden into the dimly-lighted conservatory beyond the ball-room.

Without a word he found her a seat, and still in silence he stood at her shoulder, bending over her fair head and reading her thoughts as some religious devotee might study the lineaments of his particular idol.

A lovely idol was Drusilla Ward, in good truth. Just eighteen years, Northern born and Southern bred, she seemed to combine the peculiar charms of both regions in one harmonious whole. With golden-yellow hair, soft and silken, gently waved and grandly luxuriant in its growth; with a pink and white complexion that owed naught of its perfection and purity to art, her large eyes were black as sloes and brilliant as diamonds, forming a most charming contrast.

Her mouth was small and well arched, her lips red and full enough, without being in the least voluptuous. Her teeth were small, even, white as pearls; her chin softly rounded; her ears pink and shell-like.

In figure she was neither tall nor short, lean nor dumpy, but just the graceful mien which is so much more captivating than either extreme.

And her present cavalier, so far as outward seeming went, was a fitting mate for the millionaire's daughter.

Marcus Dineon was handsome, and at the same time a *manly* man, without a suspicion of effeminacy about him, unless it lay in his gentle courtesy, which never failed him while in the presence of the opposite sex. A true woman, he regarded as something to be revered, be her worldly station high or lowly, and this sentiment lent to his manners that peculiar charm which so many of the professed "lady-killers" lack.

He stood quite six feet in height, his shoulders broad and square, his chest full and swelling, tapering down to trim, flat loins, with muscular hips and lower limbs. His facial features were strong, yet regular, his eyes of midnight blackness, his hair worn rather long, curling at the ends. In obedience to the ruling fashion, his face was clean shaven.

He wore the customary evening dress, neat and plain, without the slightest trace of jewelry about his person.

Self-composed though she usually was, something in that steady, reverential gaze caused the warm color to suffuse the fair cheeks of the heiress, and with a little laugh, she cast a shy glance into the grave, handsome face of her cavalier, saying softly:

"Shall I offer the traditional penny for your thoughts?"

With a start the young lawyer aroused himself. His swarthy face flushed hotly, then grew pale again before he could command himself sufficiently to make reply:

"They could hardly be purchased for such a trifle. Miss Ward, since they were exclusively of you."

"Of me? Surely, then, I have a right to share them at least," she quickly replied, with another shy glance upward.

Marcus Dineon caught his breath like one who is choking, as he intercepted that swift glance. He knew that the passionate love which filled his heart and permeated his entire being, must be plainly visible in his glowing eyes. Yet she—the one woman in all the wide world to him—gave no sign of fear or aversion! She kept her seat, toying with her jeweled fan. Surely she must know—surely if the avowal was one which she dreaded, she would not act thus!

Until that moment Marcus Dineon had never really dared to hope for perfect success. Time and again had he struggled to crush down the mad love that had taken possession of his entire soul, telling himself harshly that he was worse than mad to even dream of such rapturous bliss—that Drusilla Ward could only look upon him, poor, nameless, with scorn—that a proposal of marriage from him would be regarded by her as an insult. And even when he was assured of the good wishes of the parents of his idol, still he doubted—still he feared to put his fate to the test. But now—

"Miss Ward—Drusilla—may I—dare I reveal my thoughts to you?" he whispered, bending over her chair until his warm breath stirred her flossy hair and brought the warm color to her fair neck.

The golden head bent lower, the fan fluttered more nervously. There came no answer in words, but surely it was encouragement sufficient that the beauty retained her seat, making no effort to check his confession or escape its recital!

"I will—it must come some time, and as well now. If my insane hopes have deceived me, and the worst is to befall, the blow will be no heavier now than a year from hence," he whispered, hastily, in tones that told how intense were his emotions.

"Am I so hard hearted, so much to be feared, then?" softly uttered Drusilla, venturing another glance, but only to as quickly veil her eyes from that burning gaze.

"It is not that, but my own presumption that troubles me most of all. When I think of what you are—so lovely, so rich, so praised and courted by all, an angel among common humanity—then look at my own position: poor, nameless, without friends or influence—"

"Never without a true friend, as long as my father lives, Marcus!" came the softly-breathed words.

"Thank you, Drusilla," and with a gentle hand, the young lawyer raised a floating curl of the perfumed hair to his lips, touching it as reverently as might a religious devotee the garment which shrouds the adored figure of his patron saint. "Your father has been very kind. He has shown me many favors, but the greatest of all was when he granted me permission to speak to you, his precious daughter—to tell you of the wild hopes which I have dared to cherish, and to add to them his hearty approval, if they meet with favor in your eyes."

Still lower bent the fair head, and what little Marcus Dineon could see of her face, was richly suffused. She made no effort to remove. She sat in silence, waiting, listening. And yet, so great was his adoration, so humble his opinion of his own merits, the poor fellow still doubted the reception which would be given his confession.

"I was thinking what a vast gulf divides you and I, Drusilla," he said, catching his breath quickly, his low voice trembling with emotion as he skirted the point he longed yet dared not touch. "You, rich, beautiful, worshiped, well-born and aristocratic—I, poor, without name or fame, wealth or worth. In only one respect dare I believe myself at all your equal: in the power of loving through life to death!"

"Drusilla, you have known me as Marcus Dineon, son of Roderic Dineon, the judge, whose name is the synonym for probity, philanthropy and benevolence, and shining all the more brightly now that death has claimed him for its own. The whole world could bestow on me but one greater boon than the right to wear his name, morally as well as legally; but that is not, never can be mine!"

"Marcus—Mr. Dineon?" exclaimed the maiden, glancing up into his pale face with wonder in her eyes. "I do not comprehend—you are his son—"

"By adoption, no more," was the swift, almost harsh interjection. "I know not whose lawful son I am. The judge in his boundless charity, picked me up out of the gutter, when I was little more than an infant. I was dirty and ragged. One-half my vocabulary, limited enough at that age, thank Heaven! consisted of oaths, the other moiety of slang. From this you can dimly picture what must have been my birth. It is the only clew left, though the judge sought long and persistently, leaving no stone unturned in his endeavors to solve the mystery which surrounded my origin. Perhaps it was

as well that he failed. At least I have known what perfect happiness means, in his affection and gentle teachings!"

"It is so strange—I did not know—"

"Else you would have been more chary of your favors—pardon me, Miss Ward," he said quickly, flushing before the reproachful glance which she gave him at those bitter words. "I hardly knew what I was saying—and yet, you, of all women, should be able to make allowance for me when I think of what might have been, had I been blessed with honest parents."

"As you may have been—as you were," earnestly uttered the maiden, her warm hand touching his for an instant. "The child of criminals could never have grown up to become a true and noble man, without stain or reproach, even under the care and tuition of a gentleman like Judge Dineon!"

"Drusilla!" he muttered, clasping the little hand and holding it firmly, almost fiercely; "do you know what you are saying? Do you know that you are reviving hopes which I believed were dead and ash-covered?"

Her little hand trembled, her face flushed, paled, then grew bright and rosy again beneath his passionate gaze. There was a brief struggle, then her glowing eyes met his, fully, frankly, yet without the slightest trace of unmaidenliness. And low spoken though her words were, they came clearly:

"I know not what your parents were. I only know what you have become; a gentleman of whose friendship the highest lady in all the land might well be proud."

Steadily their eyes met, reading in each other the blissful truth. And then, gently, reverently, his head was bowed until his lips brushed her fair brow. A wave of crimson followed that light touch, but the frank eyes did not droop again. Yet Marcus Dineon drew back, standing erect, holding his mad passion sternly in check while he spoke:

"There must be no further chance for misunderstanding between us, Drusilla. I will speak plainly and without reserve, now that the ice has been broken. Your friendship is very dear to me, as it should be to any mortal; but I must have even more than that—it must be all or nothing!"

"I have dared to love you for more years than I can remember now—I feel as though I had always loved you! And that not with the poor, lukewarm sentiment which commonly passes for love, but an adoration that is heart, soul, life, all in all to me! Without you, I believe I would die. With you—oh, God! I would be in paradise!"

His voice grew hoarse, then choked. He caught at his throat with one sinewy hand, then tossed back his jetty locks with a swift, passionate gesture.

"Better life and paradise, than death, Marcus!"

So softly, gently, came the words from those red lips that no ear less keen than that of a lover could have rightly interpreted them. That ear was Marcus's, and with an almost glorified light upon his strong face he turned toward her, reading the blissful truth in her lustrous eyes.

Then her lithe figure was infolded in his strong arms, and their warm lips met in the first passionate kiss of holy love. Time and place were equally forgotten. They were both young, both full of life and love; they loved and were beloved—what more could they ask of this world?

With a low, startled cry, Drusilla slipped from that ardent embrace, her face paling as she cast a swift, frightened glance around them. A sound that resembled a fierce, grating curse had come to her ears, even above the mellow notes of the band in the ball-room beyond, and she gasped:

"We are seen—spied upon!"

With a swift, noiseless step, Marcus Dineon passed through the conservatory, without discovering other occupants than themselves, and then hastened back to reassure the maiden.

"You were deceived, darling, for we are here alone. Even if you were not, what matter? To-morrow, all the world may know our bliss, for, darling, now I have won you, surely you will not make me do long penance before wearing my treasure?"

Despite her recent fears, Drusilla could not entirely restrain a low, gentle laugh. This eager assurance was so strongly in contrast to his recent doubts and fears.

Marcus also saw the point, and joined in the laugh. He was far too happy to feel anything but joyous now, though the time had been when his proud, reserved nature would have taken offense at even this slight touch of ridicule.

"Am I too presuming, darling?" he whispered, gently toying with her golden locks. "You forget how long I have worshiped you in secret. You bade me live, for you and paradise; then why think of keeping me longer in purgatory?"

"And I—oh, Marcus!" hiding her burning face in his breast, as the words dropped from her lips with a passion she made no other effort to conceal. "How much happier do you think

I have been, this past year? I, who loved you with all my heart and soul! I, whom you scarcely ever came near, and when you did, to be as cold and distant as though we were worse than nothing to each other! Time and time again have I fought with myself in secret to crush out the love which I felt was unrequited! You were cruel—very hard and cruel!"

"Because I knew how unworthy I was of such a treasure," he gently whispered, pressing her trembling form still closer to himself. "I knew that a black stain rested over my past life, though through no deed of mine. I knew how proud you were—how proud were your parents of their only child, and I feared to be accused of hunting a fortune, rather than a love. Do you wonder, darling, that I hesitated—that I too tried to kill my burning love, rather than meet with a scornful rejection? But it was all in vain. I could not conquer it, and at last, in utter desperation, I visited your father. I told him all. I told him how the good judge found me, a degraded little wretch. How he took me out of the gutter and by his kindness, his generosity, his nobleness, made me what I now am. I told him all this, before speaking one word of my love for you, because I would not have him say when too late, that I had deceived him in one particular. And then—may Heaven shower its choicest blessings on him!—he told me that I might speak to you this night!"

Drusilla lifted her head for just a moment, glancing into his face with a little roguish smile as she breathed:

"And I, Marcus, was not wholly idle while you were working for love. It was my cunning persuasions in part that won his consent. I loved you so dearly—I felt that the time must come when that love would be requited—and in hopes of such a consummation, I pleaded with my father and my mother, and at last they only required a word from you to—"

Her speech was abruptly cut short by a very natural proceeding on the part of the enraptured lover; but with that we have naught to do.

Suddenly Drusilla glided from the embrace of her lover, and when a prim, starched servant made his appearance in the conservatory, the young couple were busily engaged in a very interesting botanical discussion; so much so that the dignified flunky was kept standing awaiting the pleasure of his mistress for full five minutes before she turned with:

"Well, James, what is wanted?"

"If you please, mum, it's Mr. Dineon," bowed the servant. "The master says will he please step into the library for a few minutes, as he wishes to see him on very important business, mum."

"Very well. Tell him that Mr. Dineon will be with him directly," replied Drusilla.

The servant bowed lowly, then took his departure.

"Dear father is impatient to learn the nature of your success," laughed Drusilla, with a soft blush. "We will go to him together, if you wish. I am too happy to remain alone!"

CHAPTER IV.

A SKELETON AT THE FEAST.

"I DO not know you. You gained admission here by sending me a false message. As I do not care about having a scene here, on this night of all nights, will you oblige me by taking your leave at once—and quietly?"

The speaker was Horace Ward, his voice ringing with cold distinctness as he stood pointing to the partially open door of the handsomely-furnished library.

Tall, portly, dignified in carriage at all times, the usually kind and pleasant countenance of the millionaire merchant was hard and stern just now. The fingers of his white right hand quivered and partially closed as though longing to fasten upon the degraded-looking wretch who had awakened such an unusual degree of anger in his breast.

Before him, slouching, slovenly from head to foot, stood one who seemed the very embodiment of vile wretchedness. Not alone that his clothes were ragged and filthy with dirt and grease, smelling of foul tobacco and worse liquor, for poverty alone never awoke resentment in the bosom of Horace Ward; but the looks, the very air which this man breathed seemed to proclaim his evil nature. And yet, those keen eyes which peered upward at the face of the merchant from beneath the visorless brim of the greasy, mangy-looking catskin cap—the voice that made reply—the shaking head and quivering limbs—all belonged to Captain Joseph Baldwin, alias Shaky Joe!

It was only a few hours later than when we beheld him in conference with Teddy Huke and Purty Paddy at the Tricolor, but during that length of time, Shaky Joe had turned from a flashy sport into a regular hang-dog. His mock jewels were gone, his decently whole garments turned to a mass of foul-smelling rags, his clean face to a mask of grime which, combined with his slouching, shambling gait and complete alteration of voice, so thoroughly disguised him that his closest associates would never have

recognized him, only for that tell-tale shivering and muscle-twitching.

"If you say so, I'll go," he muttered, doggedly, a vicious gleam in his shifting eyes. "But when your proud daughter comes to ruin and shame, then you'll curse the hour you refused to hear me out."

Impulsively Horace Ward took one step toward the speaker, his fist clinching and seeming ready to strike the fellow to the floor, but he paused as suddenly as Shaky Joe swiftly dropped into a position of defense that betrayed how familiar he was with the tactics of the ring.

"You drunken dog!" grated the merchant, his eyes glowing and his cheeks flushing hotly. "Dare to mention her name, and I'll have my servants drive you from the place with whips!"

The fellow's defiant attitude was instantly changed for one almost directly opposite, and there was a cringing whine to his tones as he spoke:

"I didn't mean no 'fence, gov'nor, and I wouldn't even presume to hint at one so far above a poor devil like me, if I could get along without it; but it was to do her a favor almost as much as it was to get even on my own scores, that I came here to-night. If you won't listen, all right; but you'll weep tears of blood for your obstinacy before the new year if you drive me away without first hearing what I have to say."

Despite the disgusting whine there was something in the tones and words of the fellow that caused a chill to creep over the merchant, and almost involuntarily he demanded:

"What connection can there be between my child and a low ruffian like you? Bah! I am an ass for listening to you!"

Shaky Joe laughed shortly, and resumed a degree of his customary insolent independence, for he was shrewd enough to see that his bait was taken. Horace Ward would no longer think of ejecting him, until he had learned all.

"If you don't listen, blame yourself for the shame which will fall on your daughter, sure as the sun will shine to-morrow! Say the word, and I'll go, without giving your flunkies the trouble to kick me out."

"What is it you mean? What have you to tell? Out with it, in one word!" muttered Horace Ward, flushing anew.

The ruffian cast a snaky glance into his face, showing his teeth a little as he replied:

"I'll tell it after my own fashion or not at all. It can't well be crowded into a single word, and then I want you to fully appreciate its value."

"If you think to blackmail me or mine, I'll turn the whole matter over to the police," coldly threatened Ward.

"Of course I expect to make enough money out of the job to pay me for my trouble," was the frank response; "but I'm after revenge as well."

"Revenge—on whom?"

"My son!"

Horace Ward flung out one hand impatiently. "Why do you come to me, then, if it is your son you are seeking to punish? What interest can I have in such as he?"

"More than you think, maybe. Unless the boy talks and writes lies, he expects to become your son-in-law before the passage of many weeks—Ha! I thought I would touch you at last, despite your proud and mighty airs!" the villain chuckled grimly, as the merchant involuntarily staggered back a pace, his face growing pale and a startled look coming into his eyes. "Shall I ring for the flunkies to show me out?"

With a violent effort of self-control, Horace Ward recovered himself to arrest the grimy hand that seemed about to fall upon the silver call-bell that stood on the table.

"You have said too much not to say more. You do not leave this room until you have fully explained your hints—look to it that they have good foundation, or you shall suffer for your matchless impudence as man never suffered before!" he muttered, his voice strongly agitated.

With an adroit and peculiar twist, the fellow freed his wrist, dropping into one of the cushioned chairs and tossing his mangy skin cap on the table. His tone and manner were insolent and offensive, his every action that of a brutal, half-drunken bully and vagabond.

"It's my turn now, old cock!" he said, with a coarse laugh that caused the cheeks of the proud merchant to tingle and his eyes to glow angrily. "You played the boss long enough for one with your weak hand. I hold the trumps, and now you can play second fiddle for a while."

"Say what you have to say, and then be gone!"

"Ring up one of those dandy flunkies of yours, and tell him to trot in double rations of grub and lard—particularly the dampness. I'm hungry and dry. You hear?"

It was a daring venture, but Shaky Joe was a keen judge of human nature, and took the risks without much fear of failure. Horace Ward hesitated, struggling against his choking indignation, but then the thought of his idolized

daughter—of the story which Marcus Dineon had told him, only four and twenty hours before, and then his hand struck the bell.

Shaky Joe grinned sardonically as the merchant stepped to the door and stood so that his own portly form cut off all view of the ragged wretch lolling in the easy-chair, bidding the servant carry refreshments into his private study.

"Follow me," coldly uttered the merchant, turning toward the fellow once more. "We will be more private in another room, and there you can tell your story, if you have one. If not—if this is what I suspect, simply the ruse of a half-drunken scoundrel to get a meal and make a few dollars, I give you free warning that you will be the sufferer."

"So you said before," was the careless retort, as Shaky Joe arose and cap in hand, followed the lead of Horace Ward. "If you ain't satisfied with what I have to unfold, then you're mighty hard to suit!"

Horace Ward remained standing until the servant appeared with refreshments, then closed and locked the door after him.

"Eat and drink your fill, then speak out," he said, coldly.

Shaky Joe obeyed, so far as freely sampling the liquor was concerned, but despite his assertion, he ate but little. Then, with a rude bluntness he asked:

"You know a young fellow named Marcus Dineon, gov'nor?"

Horace Ward bowed in silence.

"Son of the old judge? And I reckon he's here to-night?"

Again the merchant bowed, icy cold outwardly, though his pulse was bounding rapidly and there was a vague fear taking possession of his heart.

"Mighty smart young fellow, too, folks say. Handsome as a picture, well-bred, talented; just the sort to take the maiden fancy of a romantic young girl, eh, gov'nor?"

"What has this to do with your communication?" sharply demanded Ward, his brows contracting. "Come to the point without any beating 'round the bush. You say you want to be revenged on your son. Who and what is he? And how am I expected to be interested in him?"

"Not at all, of course," was the slow reply, Shaky Joe keenly but covertly eying his unwilling host, while pretending to squint at the light through a fresh glass of wine.

Horace Ward sunk back into his chair, unable to wholly suppress a sigh of intense relief at this answer. Though he kept telling himself that his fears were worse than idle, he could not help recalling the story of Marcus Dineon before asking permission to pay his addresses to Drusilla. It was monstrous! There could be no sort of connection between this degraded ruffian and the aristocratic young lawyer.

Shaky Joe replaced his empty glass on the table, smacking his lips and giving vent to an audible chuckle. Was it because of the rich liquor, or was it born of that cunning scrutiny?

"Not at all, of course," he repeated, smoothing down his grimy face with a still dirtier hand. "Only I am naturally interested in all smart lawyers, after the dealings I have had with them. But let that pass. I mentioned his name, because I heard something about his going to marry your daughter, and thought I'd see if there was any truth in the rumor."

"Curse your insolence!" grated Ward, dashing his clinched fist on the table with a force that caused the dishes and decanter to dance. "Mention her again, and old as I am, I'll pitch you through yonder window, if it breaks your neck!"

"You've answered me with sufficient plainness, my dear sir," laughed the ruffian, with a mock bow. "I'm satisfied."

"Who and what are you? What motive brought you here?"

A sudden and complete change came over the man. All trace of drunkenness vanished, his form was drawn up erect, and his voice rung out clear and distinct:

"Once I was a gentleman, proud and haughty as you are now. Once I could command my scores of servants, hundreds of slaves. Once I lived in a house large as this, and equally as well filled with rich and costly furniture. Once my word was good as your bond, and I could sign my checks for tens of thousands, and scatter them from right to left. Once I was called blessed by all men, for I was rich, talented, wedded to a beautiful woman, father of a noble son. But now—look at me!"

"A miserable wreck of what was once a man! An outcast from all that proud men hold precious! A common drunkard, a hardened criminal, a branded convict!"

"And a lunatic as well!" curtly added Horace Ward, as his strange visitor choked and gasped for breath.

Those cutting words acted on Shaky Joe like a *douche* of icy water. Instantly all trace of emotion vanished, and his tones were clear and even as he added:

"If filial ingratitude could have wrecked my brain, I would have filled a mad-house cell long years ago. What I am now the base treachery

of those who should have loved and honored me, have made me."

"No doubt all this is interesting to you, but very tiresome to me," impatiently interposed the merchant. "Will you please come to the point? If you desire a little money to set you on your legs again, apply to me after the ordinary fashion, and I may grant you aid. You certainly cannot force it from me by a resort to mock heroics of this style."

"And yet you will pay me one thousand dollars before we shake good-by this night," laughed Shaky Joe.

Horace Ward leaned forward to touch the bell, but with a swift gesture, Shaky Joe foiled him. The merchant leaped to his feet with an angry exclamation, his fists clinched, his eyes glowing hotly, but the ragamuffin never stirred from his seat as he leaned back, coolly gazing into that inflamed countenance. And his voice was calm as ever when he spoke:

"Don't be in a rush, gov'nor. What do you want of the bell, if I may ask?"

"To summon a servant to save me from soiling my boots by kicking you out of the house!"

With a sneering laugh, Shaky Joe pushed the bell across the table again, leaving it within reach of the angry merchant, saying lightly:

"A willful man must have his way, and I'll try no longer to balk you in cutting your own throat. Ring the bell and summon your flunkies. You can kill two birds with one stone, by sending for Marcus Dineon to bear me company when I make that dramatic exit."

"That name again! What have you to do with him? What is he to you?" cried Ward, then sinking back in his seat with a short laugh as he struck the bell sharply. "Bah! I am an ass for paying any attention to your ravings!"

"You may live long enough to discover a method in my madness," retorted Shaky Joe, adding with a deliberate emphasis:

"You ask what interest I have in Marcus Dineon? Not much. What is he to me? Only my dearly beloved son!"

CHAPTER V.

A WHIFF FROM HADES.

HORACE WARD sunk back in his chair, staring bewilderedly into the grimy face of his unwelcome visitor, shocked beyond measure by those bold words. Something of the sort he had anticipated from what had gone before, but there was a peculiar, cool audacity in the tone and manner of Shaky Joe that seemed to say he had no cause for either doubt or fear.

Almost instantly there came a gentle tap at the door in response to the call of the bell, and Shaky Joe nimbly sprung to his feet, with a side glance into the pale face of the agitated merchant. A deft twist of his practiced hand turned the key in its wards without the slightest sound to betray the fact of the door having been locked, then he turned the knob and swung open the barrier, addressing the servant:

"Go fetch a box of cigars, Johnny—the best you have on the plantation—and pick up your trotters nimbly, too! Me and my old purd here wants to raise a bit of a smudge."

The dignified servant stared in open-eyed astonishment at the free-and-easy bummer, then glanced toward his master for the order to be confirmed or denied.

"Yes—bring cigars," hastily uttered Horace Ward, his proud nature recoiling from the exposure and scene which must swiftly follow a denial.

Shaky Joe laughed softly as the servant bowed and turned away. He swung the door to, then glided back to his seat.

"I thought I'd give you just one more chance to save your bacon, my dear fellow. If you think it is not worth the trouble, when the flunky returns with the fumigators, you can broach the kicking-out process just as well."

"You malicious devil!" grated the merchant, almost suffocating with rage, yet even then remembering to guard his tones against reaching other ears than their own. "You shall prove your words, in every particular, or I'll spend my whole fortune but I'll lodge you behind the bars!"

"Which would be no new experience to yours truly," the impudent rascal grinned; then adding sharply: "Simmer down a bit, unless you want the flunky to smoke it all!"

His keen ears had caught the sound of footsteps coming that way, and a moment later the servant entered with cigars. Though it cost him a sharp pang of inward shame to so dissimulate at the bidding of a worthless rascal like his present tutor, Horace Ward forced a smile and careless ease as he said to the servant, with a motion of his white hand toward his disreputable appearing guest:

"If any one asks for me, James, I am engaged with an old employe. You may go—but remain within call."

James bowed respectfully, then retreated. Horace Ward turned upon Shaky Joe with smoldering fury.

"Now, you infernal scoundrel! offer some good excuse for your abominable actions, or I'll beat you to a mummy before turning you over to the police as a drunken blackmailer!"

"Leaving out the punching part of the programme, I don't know but what it would suit me quite as well as anything else I could think of," drawled Shaky Joe, critically selecting a cigar from the box before him. "I don't care a continental curse for either you or your daughter, only as a means of getting square with that high-flying son of mine. I can steal or beg enough to keep from starving, and what more does a man need when he gets as low down as I am now? Nothing! So open the ball as quick as you please, old fellow—but if you'll put up the scads for me, I'm open to give long odds that you can't beat one side of me!"

For a brief space the merchant seemed about to fling himself upon the insolent scoundrel, but then, as the swelling strains of music came to his ears, he choked back his just indignation as best he could. It would never do to engage in a disgraceful scuffle while so many of his friends were beneath his roof-tree.

"You know I cannot disgrace myself and my friends by thrashing you as your insolence deserves," he said, controlling his passion with a desperate effort, though his voice was husky and barely articulate. "Go on. Explain your words in as few words as possible. Your very presence is worse than poison to me."

"Nay, man!" grinned Shaky Joe, showing his teeth. "Never stop to pick and choose your words. Spit out all the bitterness you can twist your tongue around—the more the better, for I'll weigh each curse and epithet when I make out my bill and charge accordingly. I wouldn't even kick against a blow or two, if you—"

"By the Lord that made me, you shall have them, then!" grated Ward, leaping upon the tantalizing scoundrel, striking out heavily with both clenched hands.

Only to have his arms brushed aside without seeming effort on the part of the blackmailer, his feet knocked from under him, while a dexterous twist sent him into the chair which Shaky Joe had just vacated. Then, with a shivering finger moving rapidly before his face, the grimy athlete said:

"Now it's my turn to caution you, old fellow, and what I say I'm ready to back up, as you'll find if you try any more such tricks as that. Sit where you are. Keep a decent tongue betwixt your teeth, and only break silence when you have a question to ask, or by the devil that made me, I'll show you more boxing in one second than ever you saw in your whole life before! You comprehend?"

Confused and not a little stunned by the ease with which he had been handled, Horace Ward found it impossible to make any immediate reply, and Shaky Joe sunk into the chair which the merchant had so abruptly deserted, filling a glass of liquor, and tossing it off at a single swallow.

"Like you, Horace Ward, I am Northern born and bred, though a considerable portion of my life has been spent in the Sunny South; but there the semblance ends. You flourished like a bay tree, while I—well, you shall have the whole story in regular order for your more perfect understanding.

"I was rich, well born, talented, my friends said—for I had plenty of so-called friends in those days!—and married to a reigning belle. We had one child, a son, who gave promise of being an ornament to society as well as a blessing to us. Possibly this promise might have been carried out, had all continued to smile on my pathway, but I doubt it now. The black cross was in his blood—that much his mother gave him, if nothing else!

"My business called me frequently from home, and more than once when I returned I would hear whispers of the too gay behavior of my precious wife. At first I only smiled in silent scorn at what I fancied no more than the spiteful babblings of those who were envious of her beauty and popularity, but at length the rumors flew about so thick that I felt obliged to notice them, at least in part, if only in justice to my wife.

"I spoke to her, but she only laughed and kissed the words from my lips. There was naught but jealous envy in the talk; she was gay and full of life; she was the leader in society and could not immerse herself like a nun during my absence, though she might wish it never so much; and her love for me was so entire, so passionate, that it would be impossible for her to go astray, were the temptations a thousand-fold stronger than any she had yet found. So she swore, and sealed the sweet oath with her sweeter lips on mine. How could I doubt? I did not, and told her so.

"And yet, as I was soon to learn, those rumors were based on gospel truth, and her vows were false as hell itself!

"It was my custom to leave with her a few checks signed in blank, for her to fill out as occasion might require, while I was away from home. No sooner had I departed, after that talk concerning the wild rumors which impeached her virtue, than she drew out every dollar from bank, sold my property on a forged authority, then ran away with her lover.

"Word came to me but slowly, as I was then in a remote region, and when I sought for the

trail, it had grown cold. But I had no other aim in life than to find and punish those who had so bitterly wronged me, and though I was a ruined man as far as worldly wealth was concerned, and consequently almost entirely without what the world calls friends, I managed to scrape together enough money to enable me to prosecute my search for nearly a year. Then I found the man whom common rumor assigned the credit of betraying me. I gave him no time to explain or defend himself. I filled him full of lead, and was still engaged in carving him to bits, there in the crowded thoroughfare, when the policeman pounced upon me and clubbed me to insensibility.

"When I recovered consciousness, I was ironed and in a prison cell. My victim was dead, and I felt satisfied. I had washed the blot from my name with blood. As for her, sooner or later an avenging Nemesis would overtake her.

"I was brought to trial, and as a just defense, I pleaded the shameful wrong the dead man had put upon me. Then, to my horror, it was plainly proven that rumor had lied so far as that poor devil was concerned. Instead of being the paramour of my faithless wife, he had been in another State all the time, as proven to even my conviction. The cunning devils had so adroitly managed it as to cast suspicion on an entirely innocent man!

"I was convicted of murder and sentenced to be hung. My few friends and my counsel worked indefatigably, and by showing how thoroughly I had been led to believe the murdered man the one who had disgraced me, they succeeded in having my sentence changed to life imprisonment.

"I served in that hell on earth for ten long years, then received a full pardon. I went out into the world, a broken-down and degraded wretch. Once set free, those who had once been my friends, deserted me, and wherever I went, I received naught but the cold shoulder. I took to drink to drown the memory of the past. I could only associate with thieves and similar outcasts, for none other would tolerate my society. I had to live, and so I became even as were my companions. I stole and robbed with them. I shed blood when the only other alternative was detection and imprisonment, for death was far better than a return to those devilish taskmasters."

He ceased speaking, to pour out another glass of liquor, and Horace Ward, who had until now listened in sullen impatience, broke the brief silence:

"What is all this to me? Why do you force me to listen to this rambling story of a wasted life?"

"I am coming to the point which does interest you," retorted Shaky Joe, setting down the emptied glass, his voice growing more natural, his small eyes glittering viciously. "You listen because you can't help yourself. You suspect what I have yet to utter, and though you would give a pretty penny to slit my throat or otherwise forever seal my lips, you dare not repeat the attempt. But let that flea stick by the wall.

"Despite my cunning and the freedom with which I used knife or pistol when I found myself in a tight place, I did not always escape scot free, and I have served time in more different States than you would believe, even if I cared to call the roll. From some of the prisons I managed to escape; from others I was set free by the arts of those with whom I was leagued in crime; in only a few I served out the period for which I was sent up.

"One day, as I was taking my leave in the ordinary fashion from one of these public hotels, I met a woman being carried in on a stretcher. I would never have recognized her for the young and beautiful woman who deserted me years before, for she was a frightful wreck; but her senses were keener, and, with a shriek, she called me by name.

"I had a long interview with her before I left the jail. During our conversation she confessed all. She told me the real name of the man who had aided her to betray me, and gave me the history in brief of the years that followed.

"Though they escaped my vengeance, their sin was not suffered to pass unpunished. One short year, then the fellow deserted her even as she had deserted me, leaving her without a dollar to keep her from starving. Before that, even within a month from their elopement, he had begun to abuse her, to curse, kick and beat her—and I laughed in her face as she told me this with tears streaming from her bleared eyes! It was good as a feast to a starving man, this glimpse of what she had suffered while I, too, was suffering.

"She told me how she was forced to abandon our boy, for her lover feared it would lead to their discovery by me if they kept him with them. He was left with a poor family of Irish people, and for a time they were paid liberally for his charge. Then when she was deserted, hundreds of miles away from the spot where the lad was left, she could no longer keep up the payments; and as she was forced to live, after some fashion, the utter degradation in which

she was quickly plunged soon deadened her maternal feelings, and long years passed before she made any attempt to trace her son. Then, when she found herself in this city, she learned the truth. The lad had been deserted by the Irish family, to fall into the hands of a rich philanthropist, who publicly adopted him as his son."

"It is all a lie!" exclaimed Horace Ward, desperately. "You have no proof—you have hatched up this ridiculous tale in hopes of gaining hush-money!"

Shaky Joe laughed shortly, with a contemptuous fling of a quivering hand outward.

"You shall have proofs enough, never fear, my dear sir! I have learned by stern experience to never strike a blow until my aim is sure, and I know just how heavy it should fall.

"I stayed by my wife until she could give me no more information that would serve my purpose, then I left. When I did go, she was dead. They said she expired in a fit of apoplexy. It may be that they were influenced somewhat by my evidence. They were satisfied—and so was I!"

"You murdered her!" gasped the merchant, hoarsely.

"You said it, not me," laughed Shaky Joe. "If I did, who shall say I had not sufficient cause? But it is on the records that she died in a fit of apoplexy, brought on by excitement and dissipation—and that settles it!"

"Well, as you grow impatient, I'll hasten to an end.

"I came here and sought out my son. His benefactor was as proud as he was generous, and though the young fellow could not deny my proofs, he begged of me to spare him. He would see that I wanted for nothing that he could give me, and as time had weakened my paternal affections somewhat, I consented to keep our relationship a secret from all the world and the worthy judge in particular, on receipt of a certain sum of money, to be paid me on the first of every month.

"The lad kept his part of the bargain for awhile. Then the judge died, and to our consternation, we discovered what all the world now knows, that Judge Dineon died almost a beggar, having given away his money in charity as fast as he made it!

"I had counted on a generous lump-sum when the old fool croaked, and this disappointment did not sweeten my temper in the least, as you may imagine. I hunted out the lad, and we had a rather warm discussion before we came to an amicable agreement. He told me that he had strong hopes of soon winning the hand of a very rich heiress, but that if I came forward, all his hopes would be knocked west-end-and-crooked! He swore that he would press his suit as rapidly as he dared, and on the day the wedding took place, he would give me enough money to keep me for the rest of my life.

"Of course I agreed to this. I knew he had no money of his own. I did not care to steal, after serving the State so often for nothing. I believed he would keep his word. If he had, I would not be here now, telling you this dismal tale.

"Instead of keeping faith, the treacherous dog put up a cunning job on me, and the first I knew, the bobbies had me nailed fast. The proof was convincing, and I was railroaded into prison, almost before I could comprehend that I was in danger! It was not a very heavy sentence—only for two years—but the young fellow doubtless thought he would have his game won long before the expiration of that time.

"In prison I met an old mate who had considerable political influence, and as he was discharged soon after, I got him to work the wires in my favor. He was good as his word, and before my term was one-fourth served, I received a pardon.

"It did not take me long to ferret out the secrets of my dutiful son, and I learned that his coveted heiress was none other than your daughter. I watched my chance, and learning, it matters not just by what means, that he had or would shortly pop the question, I came here, to get even with him, no matter what it cost me!"

Rapidly, fiercely, he uttered these words, and they carried conviction to the soul of the listener. He felt that the fellow was speaking the truth, and it sent a bitter pang to his heart as he thought of his bright and loving child.

"It will kill her!" he muttered, hoarsely, giving unconscious utterance to the thought that racked his soul.

"Better that than the life she must lead as the wife of one in whose veins flows such treacherous blood!" grated the convict, his eyes aglow. "Think of his mother—of me—of his own dastardly treachery in swearing me into jail—his own father! Bad as I am, he is worse, for he has had a fair chance to prove himself an honest man, while I—"

"Are lying—pouring out lies as false as though coined by the arch-fiend himself!" cried Ward, striking the bell violently. "You shall be brought face to face with the man so shamefully malign—"

He abruptly checked himself as the servant

came to the door, and bade him summon Marcus Dineon to the library at once. The servant departed, and the merchant arose, saying:

"Come! I do not care to have him see that I have been in your vile company long enough for you to eat and swill. We will await the gentleman in another room."

"Bless you old cock, I'm not at all particular," grinned the villain, arising and following his lead.

They had not long to wait. Little suspecting the terrible blow which was even then hanging over her devoted head, Drusilla, leaning on the arm of the one man in all the world to her, entered the library, blushing divinely, the picture of happiness and contentment. But the eager speech died away on her lips as she caught sight of that shambling, disreputable-looking wretch standing beside the table.

"Mr. Dineon, did you ever see this fellow before?" demanded the merchant, his voice sounding harsh and stern as he strove to conceal the powerful emotions which racked his brain.

"Never, to my knowledge, sir," replied the surprised lawyer, after a swift glance at the face of Shaky Joe.

"Of course you'd say so," with a coarse laugh the ruffian retorted. "I swore I'd put a spider in your dumpling, my lad, and now I've kept my oath! Impudent as you are, I dare you to face me and deny that I am your father!"

CHAPTER VI.

TRUE AS STEEL IS WOMAN'S LOVE.

FOR an instant Marcus Dineon seemed staggered by this bold assertion, and there was a troubled, bewildered expression in the glance which he turned toward Horace Ward. A deep flush swept over his manly countenance as he saw how steadily and closely the merchant was regarding him. Surely there was not suspicion in those earnest eyes?

"Sir, who is this fellow?" he demanded, that disagreeable doubt of what he read in those eyes making his voice harder than he had any idea of at the time. "If not drunk, surely he must be insane!"

"I would gladly forfeit a fortune to see you prove him either one or the other, Marcus!" impulsively cried Horace Ward, with an angry glance toward the craftily-smiling wretch.

An ugly laugh broke from the lips of Shaky Joe.

"If you had been as generous with your offers in the first place, old cock, matters might never have gone this far. For a fortune, sure enough, in ready cash, I could have put my injured feelings in my pocket and bided my time for revenge. As it is, I can only repeat what I said before: yonder fine Jack-a-dandy is my lawful son, and—"

Boldly as he spoke, Shaky Joe was on the keen watch for breakers, and as he saw that deadly pallor chase the color from the cheeks of the young lawyer, and noted the red light flaming up in his eyes, he ostentatiously hitched the butt of a pistol around his waist until it showed plainly through the rags close to his quivering hand.

If Marcus Dineon saw either the action or the weapon, neither frightened him in his hot anger then. With firm hands he endeavored to put Drusilla away from him, but she clung to her love all the more tenaciously.

"You lie, you drunken cur!" grated Dineon, hoarsely, for the instant forgetting himself and his surroundings.

But it was only for an instant. With a powerful effort he strangled his choking emotions, turning toward Horace Ward with an humble bow, as he said:

"I humbly crave your pardon, Mr. Ward. For the moment I forgot myself, and what is your due, in the supreme insolence of that wretch."

The merchant could not entirely suppress a faint smile at this grave politeness under difficulties.

"You were justified, if ever man was, dear sir."

"Then—may I venture still further? Will you give me permission to save your servants a disagreeable task, by pitching that infamous villain out of the window?"

"For my sake, Marcus!" sobbed Drusilla, bewildered by the stormy scene and angry speeches. "He is armed—he will murder you—father, help!"

Shaky Joe turned pale despite the coating of grime that covered his features, for there was death in the blazing eyes of the young lawyer as he gently but firmly put Drusilla to one side. Quick as thought out flashed his pistol, a broad-calibered derringer for that was before the manly-tongued Colt came into common use.

"Keep your distance, boy!" he muttered, sternly. "I don't want to kill you at a single stroke, for that would be all too merciful for such a base traitor, but I'll bore you through the moment you attempt to lay the weight of your hand on me!"

Swiftly as he spoke, Shaky Joe would never have found time to utter a speech as long as this, only for the prompt interference of Horace

Ward. The merchant, proud and sensitive, dreading the busy tongues of the little world in which he lived and moved, sprung between the two men.

"No violence—I beg of you, Dineon!" he uttered in strongly-agitated tones. "This has gone too far to be settled by blows. You must disprove his claim!"

"Father!" cried Drusilla, her eyes glowing and her cheeks flushing warmly. "Surely you are not listening to that base slanderer! You do not—you cannot—believe there is even the ghost of truth in his preposterous claims!"

Marcus Dineon, maddened though he was, instantly yielded to the plea of the man whom he had fondly hoped would soon become his father-in-law. Shaky Joe kept his ground, but the muzzle of his weapon was lowered.

Horace Ward flinched a little before the burning indignation of his daughter's words, but there was only one course for him to follow now, and bravely he entered upon it.

"I must be careful for your sake, darling," he said, huskily, one trembling hand gently touching the golden-crowned head; then he turned abruptly to the young lawyer: "I have always found you a gentleman, Marcus Dineon. I believed you noble and true. That is amply proven by my receiving you here and encouraging your visits, to say nothing of—you understand," he hastily added, with a shiver of disgust as he cast a side-glance toward the grinning wretch near by. "I cannot speak more plainly before that cur."

"Oh, never mind me, my dear fellow," laughed Shaky Joe, as he sunk back into a chair. "It's all in the family, one might say, and an old codger like me don't count anyway."

"Silence, you devil!" grated the merchant, turning upon him. "Reserve your insolence for those of your own class, or I'll trample you to a mummy beneath my feet!"

"You'd like to, most dearly, no doubt!" sneered the ruffian, with a lazy wave of his shaking hand. "But go on. I'm both deaf and dumb until it is my turn to spout again."

It was very bitter, but Horace Ward knew that he must bear it for a time, or suffer still worse. He turned to the young lawyer once more, speaking rapidly:

"You remember our last conversation together, of course? I trust it is still a secret between you and I?"

Vaguely as he phrased it, Drusilla comprehended his meaning, and proudly clung to the strong arm of her accepted lover as she turned her glorious eyes full upon her parent's face.

Horace Ward frowned and bit his lip. He could not mistake the meaning of that action. Plainly than words it told of acknowledged love and perfect trust.

"I am sorry—I had hoped you had not yet spoken," he stammered, adding more coherently: "You must see that this can go no further until matters are fully cleared up—until you can fully disprove the claim of yonder wretch, you must cease visiting this house. I deeply regret the necessity, but even you cannot blame me for taking such a stand."

"Father, how can you speak so harshly?" Gently but firmly Marcus Dineon disengaged her clinging hands, stepping to one side, his voice grave and firm:

"It is his right, Drusilla. To do or say less would be a wrong to you, his only child. But, Mr. Ward, I solemnly swear to you that until this hour I never so much as laid eyes on that wretch. I do not know him. I believe every word he has uttered to be lies false as though coined by the arch-fiend himself!"

"All the same, young fellow, I'm your father!"

"What do you mean? Where are your proofs?"

"Bah!" with a malicious laugh of scorn that was sharply emphasized by his curling lip and glittering eyes. "The game is up and the fat all in the fire, lad. I've given away the whole story, and you might as well come down from your high horse first as last."

Again Horace Ward stepped between the two men, for the young lawyer seemed on the point of leaping at the throat of the insolent rascal.

"Can you explain the meaning of all this?" Marcus asked, almost in despair. "What does that fellow mean? What has he told you? What claim is this he has made on me?"

"Tell him, old man, since he prefers your tongue to that of his natural-born dad," laughed Shaky Joe.

"He swears that you are his son—that you were deserted when you were a child, but that a year or more ago he tracked you out and found you as the adopted son of Judge Roderic Dineon. He vows that he presented his claims and satisfied you that he was as he represented—your lawful father. More, he declares that you bribed him heavily to keep the secret from spreading, and that he would have done so to the end of his days, had not you basely endeavored to get him out of the way by casting him into prison on a false charge."

"True as gospel writ, every word of it!" chimed in Shaky Joe, laughing viciously at the utter consternation which was expressed in the pale face of the young man. "You cut your

own throat that time, and have only yourself to blame for this little matinee. I swore to get even with you, and I reckon I've kept my word to the very letter!"

"Father, you do not believe this?" indignantly cried the maiden, once more taking the arm of her lover. "You, who have known and respected him so long—now to listen to such vile and preposterous lies?"

"If you knew all, my dear—"

"I do know all! He told me his story to-night, before he avowed the love that has made me happier than the angels in heaven! But even if he had not, I would believe him against all the world, much less an utterly vile wretch like that!"

For the first time since that stormy interview opened, Shaky Joe seemed stung by those scornful tones. His little eyes glittered venomously as he retorted sharply:

"Vile as I am, young lady, I'm an honest man than the ungrateful scoundrel to whose arm you are clinging so fondly. It is your prospective fortune he is working for, and had you been a poor girl, be sure his love speeches would never—"

Like lightning the strong right arm of the young lawyer shot out as he leaped toward the foul-mouthed rascal, and stricken full between the eyes before he could lift a hand to either guard against the blow or draw a weapon, Shaky Joe was knocked clear off his feet and half-way across the room. Fortunately for his neck, as well as the pride of the merchant, he fell upon a cushioned couch, thus breaking his fall and preventing the shock from alarming the dancers beyond.

Horace Ward caught his arm, but Marcus Dineon made no attempt to follow up his attack. And Shaky Joe, brushing the trickling drops of blood from his face, smiled evilly as he slowly recovered his footing, speaking quietly:

"That's put down in the bill against you, too, my dutiful son! But there's room for no more items, so let's cut it short as we can. I have told my story and made my charge—"

"Which I have denied!" quickly interjected Marcus.

"As was to be expected. You wouldn't be the son of your father if you gave up such a big game without playing it out to the very last card. You see, I give you the credit you deserve," with a sneering smile that revealed his teeth.

"And I believe you, Marcus, as I would an angel just come down from heaven!" fervently uttered Drusilla.

"So does not your honored father, lady," laughed the villain. "I am sorry for you, but I'm going to carry this little affair out if it ruins the hopes of a thousand, instead of two! See here, Mr. Ward. We have wasted enough talk. Make that young fellow promise to come here at three o'clock, to-morrow afternoon, prepared to meet me and my charge. If he fails to show up, you can draw your own conclusions as to his guilt. If he does face the music, I will present the proofs on which my charge is based, and if I fail to prove every word I have uttered this night, you have my leave to prosecute me in any fashion you deem best. Can I make a fairer offer?"

"And you—now that you have sowed the poison seeds of doubt and suspicion—what security have we that you will ever return to face the man you accuse?"

It was an ugly laugh that preceded the next words of Shaky Joe, but they came promptly enough:

"Of course I can't expect you to take the simple parole of a degraded wretch like me, even though I am saving you from becoming the dupes of a graceless rascal. Send one of your flunkies out after a bobby. Give me in his charge, to be produced here at three o'clock to-morrow. Bid him treat me white, and give me a chance to get the papers I need to prove my claims, and I'll be satisfied."

For a brief space Horace Ward hesitated, but then his dubiety was put to flight by the earnest words of Dineon:

"Take him at his offer, Mr. Ward. I only ask to have a fair and thorough investigation. That he may be my father, is barely possible, since I was found a homeless child; but that I ever entered into a plot with him as vile and monstrous as that at which he has hinted, is false as the father of lies!"

With his own hand Marcus Dineon struck the bell, and as it was promptly answered by James, Horace Ward briefly bade him seek out a policeman and hasten back with him.

It was a painful silence which reigned during the brief period of the servant's absence. Shaky Joe was quietly sopping up the blood that still trickled from the knuckle-prints between his eyes, content with the way matters were going.

Drusilla still clung trustingly to the arm of her lover, glorying in this exhibition of her trustful love.

James must have found a policeman directly outside the door, for he was gone less than five minutes. Horace Ward motioned him to depart, then drew the uniformed guardian of the peace aside, whispering rapidly in his ear. There was a passage of money from one hand

to another, then the policeman grimly touched Shaky Joe on the shoulder.

"I am to have a chance to visit my lodgings for the purpose of getting what papers I need, you understand?"

"I have bidden him give you all the liberty you require, so that he brings you here to-morrow," coldly said Ward.

"That's all I ask," grinned Shaky Joe. "Come bobby; make folks think you're simply helping a boosy millionaire home from his club! Stiffen up and put on style—so!"

With a dignified strut, Shaky Joe took his departure.

When the policeman and his charge vanished, Horace Ward turned to the young lawyer, his voice hard and cold:

"You will understand, Mr. Dineon, that matters must go no further until this annoying question is settled."

"It is too late for that, father!" cried Drusilla, her face flushed and her eyes flashing. "Marcus has confessed his love, acting on the permission you gave him—"

"Under a misapprehension—"

"For shame, sir!" she cried, tears dimming the luster of her eyes. "One would think you really believed all that arrant nonsense poured forth by a drunken lunatic!"

"He is right, Miss Ward," said Dineon, gently trying to remove her clinging arms. "While even the shade of doubt remains, I can be nothing to you—you so pure and innocent!"

"And you, a king among men! And even higher than that—my love, my soul, my heaven on earth! See—by this I seal my perfect faith and love!"

She pressed her warm lips to his, then turned to her agitated father, her words coming rapidly, ardently:

"You see how thoroughly I trust and love him! I will never believe he can be akin to that disgraceful wretch, but even if he was, still would I not shrink from him. I would love him even though his birth proved to be among the very dregs and offscourings of the earth!"

"Drusilla—my child!" huskily muttered the merchant.

"My father—dearly as I love and honor you, I cannot listen to what you would call reason when the clouds hang over him whom I love as a true wife should love. You gave him permission to woo me. You told me you would prefer him for a son to all other men. It is too late now for me to take back the troth I plighted so gladly, so entirely. I love him—I love him! I could say no more though I spent the whole night in searching for words to express my perfect faith!"

"Marcus—Mr. Dineon," huskily uttered the merchant; "I appeal to your sense of right and justice. This foolish child is beside herself, and knows not what she does!"

Stooping, Marcus Dineon pressed one hot kiss upon those true and loving lips, then with gentle force unwound her arms.

"It must be, darling—Miss Ward," with a choking gasp as he corrected himself. "Until I can stand before the world free of this horrible charge, you and I are separated by a vast gulf. Good-by—to-morrow—"

He placed the nearly fainting maiden in the arms of her father, then rushed from the room and house—hastening to his doom!

CHAPTER VII.

MOKE USES HEAD, HANDS AND HEELS.

SHAKY JOE made a shrewd guess as to what would follow after the departure of Moke Horner and Yellow Jack Tandy from the Tricolor. The curiously-matched confederates turned the nearest corner, then skurried away as swiftly as they could without running the risk of awakening the suspicions of those of the police who might chance to be encountered.

Yellow Tandy kept twisting his fat neck in watching the back track, but Moke Horner kept straight ahead as though he had most important business on the other side of town. And as the Tricolor was left further and further behind them, the short, oily chuckles which occasionally punctuated the panting puffs of the fat mulatto, grew into a full-fledged guffaw.

"Hoo! you long-gear'd niggah, hol' up while a body kin ketch he breff des once. De good Lawd! ef dar ain't a fo'ty poun' bullfrog hoppin' up an' down in dis 'coon's froat, den it's mighty funny—'deed it des is, honey!"

"You too ugly fat fo' any sort o' use, boy Tandy," sniffed the Boss Roustabout, coming to a halt, after a keen glance back in the direction from whence they came. "Des a little lazy sa'n'ter like dat didn't ought to faze a man. See me! I keep dat up from day to night an' nebbur turn a ha'r!"

"An' you might des go an' go an' go, fo' all ob Tandy, des so all de money we pull out o' dem fool' niggahs didn't keep a-go'in' at de same time. You too mighty light foot, Moke. Des you whack up de plundah, an' den ef you bigger hurry to git to Maum Jinny's dan ole Tandy, des pull out."

"You flak I play gum game, eh?" with a scowl.

"You tote de yabbit-foot, honey," grinned

the yellow boy, with an oily chuckle and wag-gish twist of his fat features.

Not a very lucid observation, perhaps, but Moke Horner appeared to thoroughly understand its meaning, and a jolly laugh showed his snow-white teeth.

"Dat's yight, boy Tandy; you did you' wuk well, an' you boun' to hab you' pay, too. But de good Lawd put you down in pickle an' salt-peter ef dem fool' niggahs ebber smoke de little trick you help play on dem des now! Dey han' off you' yalla hide so quick it mek you' head swim—'deed yes!"

"Not while I kerry de yabbit-foot, dey won't!"

Tapping his mate on the shoulder, Moke spoke gravely:

"Don' you laugh at de rabbit-foot, yalla boy, or I put de black cross on you' back in a hurry! 'Ca'se we shet up de eye ob dem fool' niggahs back dar, ain't no hurt to de pure hoodoo. You help me fix up dem ole har' trotters, an' you know dey ain't no sort ob good fo' what dey as paid fo' 'em finks; dey des ole bone an' fur an' dry meat. Ain't no charm in dem. Dey wasn't ketched by a true obeah man in a ole grabeyard when de moon was des gittin' full, nur dey didn't hab de hoodoo spell put on um in de makin' up—you know dat! Dey looks des de same to one dat don't know bettah, an' dat's wuff all de money dem brack boys paid fo' 'em. But dis—he de true rabbit-foot!" drawing a dingy article from his breast and reverently touching it to his lips before replacing it.

Yellow Tandy was sober enough now, and his voice was very meek as he made reply:

"'Deed an' double 'deed I wasn't makin' no flings at de charm, Moke. Cross my heart, I meant des what I said. I tote de yabbit-foot now, an' no low trash hurt me!"

"Ole har' foot, I tell you, boy! You can't buy nur I can't sell or gib 'way de true rabbit-foot—only de obeah king can do dat. Some day I show you to him, mebbe."

Tandy was obliged to be content with this, and drawing aside where they were hidden from view of any chance passer-by, the two tricksters speedily came to a financial settlement which appeared to be quite satisfactory to them both.

"Now we go see de fun at Maum Jinny's," chuckled Moke Horner, as they came out of the dark alley and moved on. "Heap o' mighty likely gals dar, boy Tandy! From brack to yalla an' a'most white. You nebbur dar, but dey all know Moke, an' dey smile clean from year to year on any boy what come undah he wing—you see I tell you des so, ole fatty!"

"Nebber you fret fo' ole Tandy," grinned the jolly fellow as he waddled along beside the ebony athlete. "He ain't so much fo' good looks an' fine clo's as some, but when it comes to swingin' de gals—g'way niggah! dat's me all ober!"

"Ef dey ain't none ob dem funnely white goats a-buckin' roun' de gals, we hab fings all our own way. Dey do come, sometimes, wid dar 'way-up airs an' lofty notions, des to see what sort ob fun dey is goin' on in colored s'tety; an' den de low-down niggah bucks has to take de wall in a hurry," the Boss Roustabout added, in a tone that was half sullen, half defiant, as though he spoke from personal experience.

"Dey git in ole man's way, he sot down on two or free—dat settle dar hash, suah!" laughed the jolly yellow boy.

A brisk walk of a few minutes' duration carried them to their present destination; a long, low, rambling building situated in a retired back street. The windows and doors were wide open, and many gayly-dressed figures met the eager eyes of the comrades as they paused for a moment. The faint hum of voices was mingled with the lively strains of deftly-fingered violins, and above all came the mellow notes of the master of ceremonies calling out the figures.

Satisfying himself that there were no white intruders, the Boss Roustabout entered the building, followed by the ragged, greasy, devil-may-care yellow boy, whose broad grin and easy carriage showed how little he was abashed by the fine feathers of the company in which he now found himself.

At that day, few persons in New Orleans were better known than Maum Jinny. There were more stylish and select dance-houses to be found, for even then the "quadroon balls" were included in all lists of the city sights, but Maum Jinny catered for all—the rough river men as well as the aristocratic blue-bloods. Her god was money, and no man who could pay for the privilege of dancing with her—more or less—fair guests, was refused a place.

There was nothing repulsive or really immoral about the place. It was simply a house where one might dance with whom he chose, by paying for the refreshments for self and partner at the end of each set or turn.

A cheer of pleasure and a shower of eager greetings told how popular was the ebony athlete as Moke Horner entered the ballroom. Like bees around a piece of honeycomb, the women, from deepest black to faintest yellow, flocked around the Boss Roustabout, each eager

to grasp his hand and gain the honor of being the first to dance with him. And right royally did he play his part for the next two hours. Never a man in the house danced more gracefully than the sable dandy, while none there could cut a higher pigeon-wing or do it with half the ease and dexterity.

And Yellow Jack Tandy also made his mark. Running over with fun and quaintness, he kept those nearest him in a constant roar of mirth. He was about as graceful on the floor as a rheumatic elephant under similar conditions, but what he lacked in this respect, he more than made up for in willingness and main strength. His dirt and rags were forgotten; the fairest and most richly dressed of all the girls, yellow or black, gladly joined him when asked, and it really seemed as though the two adventurers were running the dance to suit themselves.

Moke Horner was resting for a few moments, standing with a really handsome yellow girl near the door, when a hand was dropped heavily on his shoulder and a harsh voice said:

"Move along, Sambol! I'll take charge of this girl!"

With a sharp snarl of anger, Moke Horner wheeled, his fist clinched and partly drawn back—but the blow was not struck.

A slender, richly dressed white man was facing him, and as their eyes fairly met, a gloved finger was shaken slowly before his face, the intruder speaking sharply:

"Hands down, my fine fellow! I know you, Moke Horner. You call yourself a free man, but, for all that, one word from my lips will send you to work on the chain gang. You've had your innings, so be off with you, or take the consequences."

The fickle beauty who had so recently been listening with blushing delight to the honeyed words of the gallant roustabout, instantly gave him the cold shoulder and accepted the proffered arm of the young gentleman. The music struck up a waltz in obedience to a nod from the young man, and Moke Horner was left alone to nurse his angry feelings.

Half a dozen young bloods, out "doing the town," had come to Maum Jinny's almost as a matter of course, and before them, the colored men had not the ghost of a show. Freeman or slaves, it was all the same. A word from those bloods would be taken as gospel writ by any magistrate in office, and the offenders sent incourtinently to do penance on the chain-gang.

Yellow Jack Tandy was also frightened away, and as he came up, Moke moved toward the outer door.

"De fat' in de fiah, now, fo' suah!" muttered Tandy as they left the building. "Reckon we done darce enough, eh?"

"Dance enough, mebbe," growled Moke Horner, savagely, as he glanced in at the open window through which he could see the fickle yellow girl closely embraced by the arms of the wine-flushed youth who had so coldly sent him to the rightabout.

"But suah as I kerry de rabbit-foot! I ain't gwine to yun away an' leabe dat cussed up-start boy to slobber dat gal all he wants! I gwine to git eben, if it takes he hide off!"

Yellow Jack stared at him in open-mouthed amazement. He could not believe his ears. He would as soon think of thrusting his bald head between the armed jaws of an alligator as rebel against the will of one of the superior race.

"G'way! you foolin', boy!" he muttered, affrightedly.

"You see how dat foolin' turn out, boy," was the stern reply. "Come dis way a bit. You got to b'ar a han' in dis—"

"'Deed I des won't, den!" splurged the yellow boy, trying to escape, but that iron grip held him firm while Moke Horner hastily whispered in his reluctant ear:

"I'll work de rabbit-foot on yer ef you show de white fedder now! You won't be hurt—dev won't nebbur know you hed nuffin' to do wid it, 'less you tell 'em youseff. An' des you do what I say, an' I'll gib you de rabbit-foot!"

"De suah enuff yabbit-fut? You won't fool dis niggah wid any ole har' trotter?" doubtfully muttered Tandy.

"Cross my heart—hope to die!"

Yellow Tandy was convinced, and though his nerves were all of a tingle, he lent an attentive ear to the whispered speech of his bolder companion. Then, with a sigh of relief he replied:

"I do it, ef it takes de hide off! But I gwine hab de ginewine yabbit-fut, suah enuff, now? No foolin'?"

Moke Horner thrust the prized package into his eager hand, and then Yellow Jack skurried away hot-foot to carry out his share of the plot which revengeful Moke had devised.

It was no difficult matter to find the allies he needed among the more dusky of the girls. As a matter of course, the half-drunken bloods would dance only with the handsomest women in attendance, and these were to be found exclusively among the few quadroons and the mulattoes, and as no negro man dared take the floor to dance while the lordly whites were in

possession, all save those favored few were left sullen wall-flowers.

With native cunning Yellow Tandy made his arrangements. A woman was stationed close to each light, and these they were to extinguish at a signal agreed upon. Half a dozen of the stoutest negro men were ready to rush in and lend their aid when the ball fairly opened.

Just as the second waltz came to an end, and the flushed whites led their partners up to the bar, a strangely deformed figure rushed into the room and shambled up to them.

It wore the ragged dress of a woman. Head almost touched its knees, and a huge hump towered above its shoulders. A flaming bandana kerchief was wound around its head, the free ends drooping over and obscuring the features.

"De good Lawd, gemmans!" came a cracked and wheezing tone from the nondescript as the whites glanced around at the sound of the thumping cane which aided the footsteps of the deformed crone. "Dar's blood on de face ob de moon, an' dar's gwine fo' to be weepin' an' wailin' an' gnashin' ob teef in de houses ob dem what lub you-dem, ef de angel ob de good Lawd don't stretch out he mighty han' to save you in dis hour ob drefful need—'deed an' double 'deed dar des is!"

"The Witch of Endor!" laughed one of the young men, staring at the curious object with wine-bleared eyes.

"Kick the old idiot out of the room!" brutally cried another, stepping forward as though about to suit his action to his words.

Instead, they all caught a glimpse of a tall figure rising out of that deformed bundle; then the lights went out.

A wild, fierce yell rent the darkness, and then the young bloods were assailed by what seemed to be a steam-engine gone mad, so fierce and heavy came the blows, knocking them here and there, beating down their attempted guards and giving them no time or opportunity to draw a weapon to defend themselves.

The women scattered with terrified shrieks. The stalwart negroes rushed in to complete the work so well begun by Moke Horner, and it seemed as though the young bloods would have to pay full price for their amusement before the end came.

Yellow Jack Tandy was dancing nervously before the door, when he was caught by Moke Horner, who was satisfied with the work already done, and together the twain ran swiftly away through the night, knowing that the wild uproar would soon bring the police down upon Maum Jinny's place.

As he ran, the Boss Roustabout tore off the rags with which he had so cunningly disguised himself, dropping them in the street, soon showing himself again.

"You fluk de boys 'll let 'em go without killin'?" panted Tandy, as his leader slackened his pace, beginning to feel at a safe distance from the scene of the disturbance.

"Cuss 'em! who care?" savagely grated the negro, his eyes glowing redly through the darkness of the narrow alley. "What dey keer ef dey kill us? Yit we free men, you an' me, boy. We free as dem white trash, in name, dat is. What right dey got to come an' kick us out when we 'joyin' ob ourselves? What right say you git, or go on stone pile? What right take 'way our gals, like dat, eh? Debbie burn 'em alibe say I!"

"Don't keer how many killed, only mebbe it git foun' out you n' me was dar. Dat hurt!" muttered Tandy.

His arm was tightly gripped by Horner, whose keen eye had caught sight of human figures lurking at the mouth of the narrow alley through which they were making their way.

"Hist! somebody dar—mebbe de bobbies to ketch us!" he softly breathed, glaring keenly ahead in the effort to solve his doubts, for or against.

Just beyond stood a dimly-burning street lamp, and just at that juncture a tall figure came beneath it, moving down the street, and then two dark forms darted out of the alley and assailed the wayfarer with gleaming weapons.

A startled cry of pain, then the tall figure reeled and fell to the ground, the assassins tumbling over him. A short struggle, then came a sharp report and bright flash from a pistol, fired by one of the prostrate trio.

All this occurred with lightning-like rapidity, and the man was down before the negroes could cry out or move a hand to save the assailed; but then, with a grating oath of generous rage, Moke Horner darted forward, striking out savagely at the uppermost figures with a heavy slung-shot which he, in common with most of his class at that time, carried.

His blows failed to take complete effect, owing to the deceptive shadows and the rapid movements of the assassins, but it was sufficient to alarm them, and they rolled away and leaped to their feet with startled cries:

"The bobbies—skin out, mate!" grated one, darting away.

Sure enough the police had taken alarm at the cries and the pistol shot, and Moke was on the point of taking to his heels, lest he be arrested

as the murderer, when he caught a glimpse of the pale, bloodstained face, and cried aloud:

"De good Lawd! it's Marse Dinegon—killed dead!"

He flung the limp figure over his shoulder and fled at top-speed through the alley, closely followed by Yellow Jack Tandy.

CHAPTER VIII.

FRIENDS MAY DOUBT, BUT TRUE LOVE NEVER.

"DRUSILLA, it is almost time! Once more I beg of you to retire with your mother, and leave me to face these men alone when they come. Do not oblige me to order you, child!"

The night had passed, the day had crept along until the clock was almost ready to strike three, and in the shade-darkened library sat Horace Ward, Melicent, his wife, and their only child, Drusilla.

All of them bore traces in their faces of the trouble which had so unexpectedly come upon them, but the wan, never very strong wife showed the effects most clearly.

A true wife and loving mother, she lived only for her husband and her child; and though Horace Ward, knowing how very feeble her health had grown, tried to keep the truth from her until all should be settled in one way or the other, she read his trouble in his uneasy eyes, and he felt obliged to tell her all. It came like a personal blow, for she had grown very fond of the talented young lawyer since she knew the virgin heart of her dear child had gone out to meet his, and long before this fatal night she secretly looked upon Marcus Dinegon as a son. It was with her knowledge and consent that he avowed his love that night, and it was her motherly love for them both that lent her strength to assume all the weight and responsibility which rests on the hostess on such an occasion, leaving Drusilla perfectly free after the customary greetings were fairly over.

Northern born and bred, Mrs. Ward had never grown accustomed to the enervating—to her constitution—airs of the South, and she was forced to spend each summer further North. She seemed more feeble than usual this spring, and in her case the blow had been almost more than she could bear. Yet she bravely insisted on bearing her daughter company and lending her support through what she felt must prove a terrible ordeal for all concerned.

Drusilla, with her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, least of all showed the effects of the exciting scene of the past evening; but those who loved her best knew that she was feverish, her nerves strung almost to breaking.

"Do not, father," hastily replied Drusilla, with her red lips quivering a little. "For the first time in my life I would feel obliged to disobey an order from your lips. I must stay—I must be where I can hear and see all—where I can show my love and perfect faith in the very face of the cowardly plotters who are seeking to destroy your confidence in one who is high above them as Heaven is above Hades! Do not ask me—let me stay here until the end."

Horace Ward frowned a little at her impulsive speech.

"If the story told by that man should prove true?"

"Father—true? I'd sooner believe the angels in heaven were false to their holiest vows!"

"Yet that wretch told a terrible straight tale!" half-groaned the merchant, his hands working uneasily in each other as he glanced toward the clock. "There was no weak spot nor flaw in it, that I could detect—"

"Save in his choosing such a pure and honorable mark for his poisoned shafts!" swiftly interposed the maiden, her eyes all aglow with love and faith.

"Yet it may be true. Remember that Marcus confessed that he knew nothing positive regarding his life before he was adopted as the son of Judge Dinegon, and of that event he can only remember what the good man told him as he lay on his death-bed. It may be true, though I would give half my fortune to be assured that it was false!"

"There may be a particle of truth mixed in with the vile mountain of lies," said Drusilla, a little more calmly. "Marcus does not deny his being a foundling; what he does deny is having ever entered into a shameful compact with this degraded wretch to conceal the truth. I will never believe that he was guilty of such wrong, until his own lips condemn him!"

"It is hard for me to believe it of him—but despite my wish to think him honorable, I cannot overlook the facts as presented by that degraded wretch."

"Threatened as that villain must have threatened him, loving you as he did, even then, and knowing that such a shameful record of the past must forever place a gulf between you two, it would not be so strange that, without thinking at first where the deceit might lead him, he should yield and try to still the cruel tongue with gold. And after the first false step, others would follow as a matter of course."

"With others, perhaps, but not with him!" was the impulsive reply of the loyal-souled maiden. "Father—"

The striking of the clock checked her words, and the warm flush died out of her cheeks and one hand went to her breast as though each one of those silvery chimes was a bitter blow that found the center of her heart.

The same cold, crushing spell fell upon them all. Mrs. Ward was taken with a shivering fit, and though she strove with all her feeble powers to conquer the feeling, she sunk back in her chair with a low, gasping moan, white as a corpse.

Greatly agitated, Horace Ward leaped forward and caught her in his arms. She had fainted outright, and he carried her out of the room, Drusilla following.

A servant was dispatched in hot haste for the doctor, and as he left the house, he met a policeman in private clothes, accompanying a man whose form shook and quivered like one sorely afflicted with the ague.

James admitted them to the house and conducted them into the library, stiffly standing guard just within the door, as though he suspected them of being bent on theft or some more heinous crime.

Shortly afterward the doctor came, and when satisfied that his wife was in no immediate danger, Horace Ward went down to the library, accompanied, though much against his will, by Drusilla.

Shaky Joe rose from his seat with a bow so deep that it savored strongly of mockery, but neither father nor daughter recognized it by word or look, seating themselves in silence.

Shaky Joe, looking much cleaner and less dilapidated than on his former visit, smiled until his teeth were visible, and took his revenge in a characteristic fashion.

"The rogue is here, your honor, on time, but the honorable gentleman—where is he? The hour was three, if I mistake not. It is now half an hour late, unless your clock is fast."

The policeman scowled menacingly at the audacious rascal and muttered sternly:

"You hold your hush until the gent says speak!"

Shaky Joe turned on him with a savage snarl.

"You have done your share of the job in seeing that I kept the appointment of last night. There is no charge laid against me, that I know of. Keep still, you!"

"There will be—a charge of attempted blackmail—unless you can fully substantiate the vile tale you told me last night!" sternly exclaimed the merchant.

Shaky Joe immediately cooled down, his voice smooth and respectful as he made reply:

"I do not blame you for speaking harshly, for I would do the same in your place and under the same circumstances. Last night I was half drunk, and hardly accountable for my words or actions—"

"Then you come to beg pardon—to take back the charge you brought against Mr. Dinegon?" eagerly cried Drusilla, her glorious eyes all aglow as she leaned forward in her ardor.

Shaky Joe gazed intently into the lovely face for a moment or two, then shook his head as he slowly replied:

"No, miss—and for your sake I am sorry that I can't give you a different answer."

"Drusilla, be quiet! And you, fellow, address yourself to me alone!" sharply cried Horace Ward.

"All right—that suits me better," laughed the ruffian as all traces of compassion vanished from his voice and face. "I can talk straight enough to a man, where the face of a woman sort of hampers my tongue. Will you have my story now?"

"Mr. Dinegon has not yet arrived."

Shaky Joe arched his shaggy eyebrows.

"Then you really expect him to call?"

"Of course I do!" snapped the merchant, irritably. "He pledged his word of honor to meet you here."

"At three o'clock, and it is now almost four," coolly drawled the shaking man. "Of course, if you insist on waiting for his coming before you examine my proofs, all right. Time is not particularly precious to me, and I can spare a week or two just as well as not!"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said last night—that my dutiful son will not stick his head into the trap, now he knows how snugly it is set for him. In other words, he's off for pastures new!"

"Then you have murdered him!" cried Drusilla, her face growing pale as that of a corpse at the mere thought. "If alive, he will be here to prove you a base calumniator!"

Not a muscle of Shaky Joe's face showed that he heard her words. He gazed steadily into the face of the merchant, awaiting his decision.

Horace Ward hesitated, glancing up at the clock. Fervently as he wished the young lawyer would clear himself of the damaging charges brought against him, he could not help seeing that matters looked very dark and unpromising, even without this unaccountable delay in keeping his appointment. Then the man who accused him seemed so wholly at ease! Surely, unless he had truth at his back, he would be less bold, more cautious?

Until the clock struck the hour of four, silence

reigned in the room. Then, unable longer to endure the painful suspense, Horace Ward spoke:

"You may produce your proofs. We can have that much done while waiting for Mr. Dineon."

Shaky Joe laughed a little sourly as he said in reply:

"One would think his failure to appear would be proof sufficient for even you, but I'm not particular to a shade. Shall I speak out before this worthy star, or will you prefer his finger out of the pie?"

Horace Ward hesitated, but only for an instant.

"Speak out. If your tale is true, no matter how many besides ourselves know of it. If a lie—as I firmly believe! he will be a good witness when you are brought before the bar of justice to answer for your vile conduct!"

Even these hot words fell from the armor in which Shaky Joe had incased himself, just as water drops from the oiled back of a wild duck.

"It is for you to decide, my dear sir," he smiled, as he produced a fat note-book from an inner pocket, opening it and arranging various papers with his quivering fingers. "I leave my reward wholly to your generosity. I was too drunk to be wholly myself last night, or I'd never have tangled myself up in this affair, without making one more effort to bring the boy under my thumb. When I found he was false to me in one respect, I jumped to the conclusion that he was false in all—that his boasted heirship was a lie with all the rest!"

"What do you mean?" sharply demanded Ward.

"That my pockets are empty. That I haven't a decent suit of clothes to put on my back, nor a picayune to buy a drink of whisky or bite of grub! If I had known for sure that the boy was speeding so well in his game for a fortune, I would have waited until after the happy day, then struck him for a generous stake. He would have come down handsomely, rather than have me blow the gaff so soon! But like an idiot, I must get drunk and nurse my revenge against him until it set my brain wild with the longing to put a spider in his dumpling! I came here, and you know the rest. I've settled him, for he'll never show his face to you again or—"

"He will if he is alive! I believe you have murdered him to escape his vengeance!" gasped Drusilla, feverishly.

"Did you speak, my dear sir?" suavely asked Shaky Joe, of the merchant. "I fancied I heard you say something about my committing murder. If so, this man can prove that I never passed out of his sight after I was placed in his charge."

"It is true," gravely uttered the policeman. "I never lost sight of him for a moment. When we left the station, no word had come of any fight or murder having taken place."

"Then of course I must have been mistaken thinking I heard any such charge, for of course none present would make such unless they had ample proofs to back their words."

"You have made a charge—are you able to prove it?" sharply cried Horace Ward.

"Yes, since I can do no better. Curse the liquor that unhinged my tongue! I might have made a glorious stake—"

"If you prove what you say, you shall not want for gold, you bloodhound! I will give you enough to enable you to drink yourself to death and bless the day that witnesses the end!" hoarsely uttered Ward, turning from an anxious glance at the face of the clock. "Go on—I am sitting on nettles!"

"Good enough!" cried Shaky Joe, with a satisfied light in his eyes. "Your word is your bond, I've heard men say, and I'll trust to your ideas of what is right."

"In the first place," he added, selecting a small scrap of paper from the book, "here is a note of the place where I married my wife. You can easily find the record of our marriage, as well as the birth and baptism of our son, if you choose to go that far back in your investigations. Next, a memorandum where the Irish couple live who took charge of the boy, when his mother saw fit to abandon him. You will find them both living, and a bit of gold will doubtless lead them to open their mouths to tell all they know."

"Here is the note which was pinned to the dress of the child Judge Dineon adopted when it was left at his door."

"You are wrong there!" cried Drusilla, her eyes glowing. "The judge found him in the streets, and though he spent both time and money freely, he failed to find any clue to his parentage, no matter how slight! If you falsify in one thing, you will not hesitate to do so throughout!"

"That was the story the judge preferred to tell his friends, I am well aware," was the cool retort; "but investigation will show that I am now giving the correct version."

"The child was left at his door, one dark and stormy night, and when the bell was answered, the lad walked inside. When they could understand his story, it was too late to seek for the woman who left him there, with any hope of finding her, and consequently none was made that night."

"On the child's dress was found a note, stating that he was the son of honest parents, who would claim him in time. The note was written by a crony of the Irishwoman's, and she had taken this means of getting rid of a burden, since all payments had ceased coming in for his support."

"I add to this, a copy of a memorandum which the judge made of the day and date, with other facts which may interest you. You can satisfy yourself of their authenticity at your leisure. And now I come to the second part of my story."

"Here are several notes which were written to me by the young gentleman, when he could not furnish me with the money I asked of him. They are not signed, but you may be familiar with his handwriting; if not, you can easily procure samples."

Drusilla darted forward and caught the notes from his disease-shaken fingers, scanning them eagerly. Shaky Joe leaned back in his chair, smiling grimly as he saw the color fade from her face and her eyes fill with a hunted light.

"They are base forgeries!" she cried, rending them to fragments and tossing them aside. "I will not believe this horrible story, until he himself confesses his guiltiness!"

The clock struck the hour of five, and Shaky Joe lifted his trembling hand with a hard and bitter laugh.

"He has confessed! Two hours late, and still he is not here! What better proof do you ask than that? If innocent, he would have been here before the time, rather than lie under so heavy an imputation one minute longer than necessary! I told you last night he would never come, and I repeat it now!"

The door-bell rung sharply, and Drusilla uttered a cry.

"He has come! I knew he would—my noble love!"

Shaky Joe laughed harshly as he muttered: "Lend me a dollar, and I'll bet it against a picayune that it isn't our duck, even yet!"

But there was an uneasy light in his eye that told the watchful merchant he was ill at ease despite his bold words.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LAST FEATHER.

DRUSILLA started from her chair as though she would have rushed to welcome the man in whose truth and honesty she alone seemed to have perfect faith, but Horace Ward anticipated her intention, and swiftly striding to her side, he held her arm with a grasp which she was unable to struggle against, as he hastily cautioned in her ear:

"Compose yourself, daughter! Time enough to give full vent to your feelings when he has explained this long delay."

All eyes were turned with expectant impatience toward the door, but as the moments rapidly rolled up without the appearance of Marcus Dineon, Horace Ward bit his lips until the blood showed, while the flush slowly faded out of the face of the loyal maiden. Full five minutes had elapsed since that sharp ring startled them. Already so late—surely the accused, if it were indeed he, would not keep them waiting like this!

Shaky Joe leaned lazily back in his chair, a malicious smile playing around his quivering lips. He alone of all the party seemed fully at his ease and wholly satisfied with the way in which matters were working.

A gentle tap at the door, a brief pause, then in obedience to the Words of Horace Ward, the door opened and James, looking flushed and unusually embarrassed, entered the library.

"Well, what is it?" hastily demanded the merchant. "Has not Mr. Dineon arrived? Show him in at once."

"If you please, sir, it is not Mr. Dineon," replied the flustered servant, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. "It's a woman, which I think she's crazy by the way she do go on! She says she must and will see you, though—"

"You have your instructions—not at home to anybody but Mr. Marcus Dineon. Tell her to call again."

"Indeed I did, sir, but she wouldn't take it for an answer by no means, and swore that if I didn't let her in, she'd tear the door-bell down and rouse up the whole street."

Shaky Joe gave vent to a low, mocking laugh that stung like the lash of a whip. The policeman caught him by the arm and shook his club menacingly as he growled harshly:

"Keep still, you, or I'll lend you a wooden muzzie!"

The door was flung violently open, the knob striking James in the small of the back with a force that staggered him, and a woman rushed into the library, an eager cry parting her lips, but breaking short off as she glanced around the room without discovering the person she sought.

"Where is he? Am I too late?" she gasped, staggering back with one hand pressed over her heart.

Horace Ward stepped forward and confronted her. His face was hard-set, his voice so cold that it sounded very harsh, for his suspicions

had taken another turn now, and he believed that this woman was only an ally of the disease-shaken ruffian—that they were leagued together to ruin Marcus Dineon in the sight of his friends.

"Who are you, and what do you mean? Who did you expect to meet here?"

With a delicately-gloved hand the woman threw back the heavy veil which covered her face, staring around her with a bewildered air, apparently without hearing or comprehending the meaning of the words uttered by the merchant.

Her face was thin and very pale, with swollen circles about her eyes that told of long and bitter weeping.

Her gaze fell upon Drusilla, who was leaning forward to command a fuller view, and with a sobbing cry the stranger brushed past Horace Ward, falling on her knees at the feet of his daughter, raising her clasped hands as she gasped:

"You, lady—your face is kind and true—you would not attempt to deceive a poor, heart-broken girl? Tell me that it is not true, and I will bless you till my dying day! Tell me that it is false—that he is innocent of the damning charge which they bring against him!"

Hysterical sobs choked her further speech, and her head fell forward until it touched the knees of the astonished, bewildered girl to whom she pleaded so wildly.

Drusilla lifted the quivering head and pushed back the hair that, shaken from its confinement, fell over and concealed the grief-marked face from view. With a soft hand she caressed the tear-wet cheeks, and in soothing tones she whispered:

"You are safe here, dear, and among friends. Tell me what is your cause for grief, and if I can help you, I certainly will do so. Who is it you seek, and why look for him here?"

The woman abruptly freed her head, and raised her red and swollen eyes to the compassionate face above her, seeking to read the truth therein. Then she wildly exclaimed:

"My husband—he is not here? He does not want to marry you, as they charge? Say it is a lie, and I will forever bless and pray for you! Oh, lady! it is not true?"

Drusilla turned pale as a ghost, pushing back her chair and staring wildly at the kneeling suppliant, a terrible fear for a single instant assailing her heart and shaking her supreme faith in the honor of the man whom she loved better far than life itself. But only for a moment; then she flushed with hot shame at having doubted him even for an instant.

Horace Ward recovered from the surprise into which the impetuous actions of the stranger had cast him, and as his daughter recoiled, he sprang forward and caught the woman by the arm, sternly demanding:

"Who are you, and what is it you want here? Speak out, and explain why you have intruded where you are neither known nor wanted—speak out, and quickly!"

"Show him the letter I sent you, and I rather reckon he'll find that sufficient excuse for your intrusion!" suddenly uttered Shaky Joe, twisting his arm free from the grasp of the policeman and sliding his chair to a safer distance.

With a half-smothered curse, Horace Ward wheeled upon him, his eyes glowing with bitter scorn as he cried:

"I might have known it! You are in league to ruin an honorable gentleman in our estimation—but you will fail! Ay, worse than fail, else there is no justice to be had in the whole land for dastardly plotters such as you!"

Shaky Joe listened to this outburst with a cold smile, and his quiet reply was more effective than the hottest retort would have been:

"If we are conspirators, it is for the purpose of saving your daughter from the cunning toils of one who would make her—not his wife, for I believe our present laws rather frown on polygamy."

The hot speech of the merchant served to nerve the woman by wounding her self-pride, and taking a crumpled sheet of paper from her bosom, she held it toward him as she cried:

"This is my excuse for intruding, as you call it! Have I not the moral right to come here, or anywhere, in order to disprove such a foul and lying charge against my husband?"

Mechanically Horace Ward took the paper from her hand and cast his glowing eyes swiftly over it. Then, with an oath that almost scorched his lips, it was so full of bitter hatred and longing for vengeance, he dropped the note, and as it touched the carpet, he raised one foot to grind it beneath his heel. Impetuous as was his action, the movements of Drusilla were still more rapid, and her white hand rescued the document from destruction, springing back to avoid the agitated grasp of her startled parent.

"Do not read—Drusilla, I command you!" he cried; but his words fell unheeded as her wild eyes drank in the lines.

They were not many, and may be given place here:

"MRS. MARCUS DINEON:—"

"MADAME:—Though these lines come to you with—"

out a signature, believe me when I say that they are intended for your own good, as well as that of another young and lovely lady. You are lawfully married, but your husband never takes you into society. Why? Because he is courting another whom he is on the point of marrying. If you doubt this statement, you can readily satisfy yourself of its truth. Come to the address inclosed, to-morrow, at any time after three o'clock, and insist on being admitted. Marcus Dineon will be there, with the lady who has supplanted you in his affections—and so will be the writer of these lines of warning.

"As you hope to save your lawful husband from the sin of committing bigamy, do not fail to act on this hint!"

Even this was not sufficient to shake the loyal faith and whole souled love of the maiden on whose devoted head the crushing blows were falling in such swift succession. She flung the anonymous communication from her with lofty scorn, her eyes ablaze as she glided forward and stood face to face with the woman who had produced it.

"It is false—you are not his wife! You think to degrade him in my eyes; but the foul insult shall recoil on your own head! Go! you and your still viler confederate! And take with you the consolation that Marcus Dineon stands still higher in my estimation—if that were possible—than before your evil charges were hurled at him in his absence! I love him—he loves me—and, God willing! we will wed!"

So prompt her actions, so swift her words, that Horace Ward was unable to interfere. Indeed, so terribly had the scene tried him that his heart leaped and throbbed so painfully that he staggered back, gasping for breath, only saved from falling to the floor by a chair into which he sunk.

Pale, frightened, the stranger shrunk from the girl; but those last words brought a vivid color to her wan cheeks, and her voice rung out clearly, defiantly:

"You shameless creature! You dare avow your love for him—my lawful husband—to my very face?"

"Easy, ladies!" laughed Shaky Joe, a devilish glee in his treacherous eyes as he rubbed his quivering hands together and shuffled his feet. "Don't get to pulling hair—"

The brawny policeman clapped one hand over his lips and shook his locust threateningly; but Shaky Joe never once glanced toward him. His whole attention was devoted to the two women, who each claimed the love of Marcus Dineon.

"It is false!" cried Drusilla, the personification of just indignation and lofty scorn. "Marcus Dineon is nothing to you. You have no proofs—"

With a short, hysterical laugh, the woman drew a paper from her pocket and unfolded it while holding it before the startled eyes of her rival. At a single glance Drusilla took in its purport, and staggering back, both hands clasping her madly throbbing temples, she uttered one gasping wail, then fell in a lifeless heap at the feet of her parent.

"Back, you devils!" hoarsely gasped the merchant, waving aside the policeman and Shaky Joe, both of whom leaped toward the heart-stricken girl. "Touch her with your foul hands, and I'll dash your vile brains out! James!"

As he lifted the senseless form in his arms, the door was flung open, and the servant entered.

"Guard the door, and kill whoever dares try to escape while I am gone!" grated the merchant, passing out of the room and bearing his daughter up to her chamber.

Pale, but resolute, the faithful servant closed the door and stood on guard, with his strong hands clasping the back of a chair, and doubtless he would have at least attempted to carry out the stern order, had any one of the trio made an effort to escape. But while the woman sunk into a chair, sobbing hysterically, Shaky Joe crossed his legs, staring up at the frescoed ceiling and whistling softly, while the policeman kept a watchful eye upon him, club in hand.

There came to them the sounds of rapidly-plied feet, with the hasty opening and closing of doors, then Horace Ward returned to the library, motioning James to withdraw.

"Summon two of the best men, and keep within call. Tell them to bring arms, and prepare to use them, if I give you the word. Go, and make haste!"

He turned to the woman, who had uncovered her face at his entrance, and his voice was very hard as he spoke:

"Show me the paper that struck my daughter down!"

In silence she obeyed, trembling violently.

His pale face flushed hotly as he glanced keenly over it, and a grating curse parted his teeth. It was a marriage certificate, duly signed and witnessed, and stated that Marcus Dineon and Rose Enright had been lawfully united in the holy bonds of matrimony, in accordance with the laws of man and the church. The paper was signed by the officiating clergyman, whom Horace Ward recognized by name, and his last hope fled as he failed to detect the slightest sign of fraud or irregularity in the document.

"You are the person called in this by the

name of Rose Enright?" he demanded, folding the paper with fingers that trembled despite his effort of self-control.

"I am," gasped the woman, sobbing. "He is my husband—I love him better than life—oh, sir! do not take him from me! It will kill me! He is all I have left in the world—"

Her sobs overpowered her voice, and Shaky Joe interposed.

"Let me do the talking, gov'nor. I can tell more than she can about it, any way."

"Speak—but beware! if I catch you tripping, I'll railroad you to State's prison, if it costs my entire fortune!"

"And serve me mighty right, too," cheerfully acquiesced the cool rascal. "But this time I know the moves too thoroughly to make a mistake, even to gratify you."

"Speak out, then, curse you!" grated the merchant.

"There isn't much more to tell for you've got about all of the facts of the case before you now. As I told you, I made a vow to get even with the boy for playing me dirt, and though I kept pretty well drunk all the time, I made sure of my game before playing a card. I discovered that the lad had a woman under his charge, though I did not suspect the whole truth, as she passed under another name. I thought I could work her in my game, however, and investigating, I found proof that she was really married to him, and under his right name. Of course I knew I had him foul then, and last night I wrote that letter to her, bidding her come here if she wished to save her husband from committing bigamy. She came—I came—but our dutiful son and husband has thought it best to keep himself shady. Why, I leave it for you to judge."

He ceased speaking, with an outward fling of his shaking hand as he settled back in his chair, as though he considered his whole duty performed.

Horace Ward could no longer doubt the black guilt of the young man whom he had so wholly honored and respected. The proofs were so overwhelming that to doubt longer was simply madness. Yet it was with difficulty that he could bring himself to admit as much, even inferentially, to the persons who had brought all this to pass, covering him and his with sorrow and bitter humiliation. Yet it could not well be avoided, and he made the best of a bad business.

Passing over to his desk, he wrote rapidly for a few moments, then handed Shaky Joe a check. The villain eagerly grasped it, but a shade fell over his face as he noted the date—one week ahead of that day.

"You've made a little error in the date, gov'nor!" he exclaimed, but Horace Ward cut him short with the cold words:

"I have made no error. If you have had a hand in this strange disappearance of Marcus Dineon, the men I mean to set to work will find some trace of your agency before that check can be cashed. If not—if you have been acting in good faith—you can well afford to wait a few days for your reward. Refuse, and I will swear out a warrant against you—"

"I won't trouble you that far, gov'nor," with a grin.

Horace Ward tossed him a few gold coins, contemptuously.

"Those will keep you in food and drink until that date. As for you, officer, keep an eye on his movements so that you can produce him at a moment's notice, should Mr. Dineon return to face the charges against him."

He spoke a few words to the woman who claimed to be the lawfully wedded wife of Marcus Dineon, securing her address, after which he rung for James to show them out.

As they crossed the threshold, a wild, hysterical laugh came floating down the stairs, followed by a piercing shriek.

Poor Drusilla!

CHAPTER X.

"THE IRREPRESSIBLE CONFLICT."

"AUGH! I've off the silly blatherin' av ye, ye crooked shinned naygur! It's sick to the sthomic ye're makin' all the dacint white gentilemin that's aboard the good ould Wather Witch this blissid avenin' wid yer bloody clickerty-clack! Tie up the tongue av ye, ye black ape, or it's Purty Paddy that'll lind ye a bat across the noggin that'll pit ye to slape four wan few minnits—do ye moind that, now?"

"De—good—Lawd! des lissen to de flannel-moufed bog-trotter 'peat ober what he one day hearn a man say—fo' he wooden pate too full ob ignorance to hol' so many words ob he own sink-in'. G'way, you low-down white trash! It's a pow'ful bad niggab when I gits my mad 'way up! You come foolin' long o' me, an' fust you know you won't know nuffin'!"

"Augh! go soak your hid an' botthle yer brith fer rat p'ison! Sure, I c'd make a betther man wid double the daanger in him, out av black mud an' sp'it! Don't ye go sthickin' the painted nose av ye up at the loikes av me, or be the r'yal kings av ould Ireland that Purty Paddy kim down from, I'll be afther knockin' the two eyes av ye into wan, wid a poonch av this little bunch av bones an' tough mate—smill

av that, ye no-tailed baboon, an' call it your mather—whirroo!"

The good boat Water Witch was steadily plowing her way through the turbid and turbulent current of the great Mississippi, nearly a month after the occurrence of the events which have already been recorded.

When the steamer left New Orleans, the river was "bank-full," and the passage of each hour since had witnessed the brown waters steadily creeping higher and higher, until it seemed as though the watery element meant to blot out the land entirely. And, though men of experience and nerve, both the captain and the two pilots in charge grew more and more uneasy the further they left the Crescent City behind them.

News was not flashed across a continent then in a second, as it were, and they had no means of knowing how matters were above them; but on each side they were given evidence of the power and extent of the flood. Only where the banks were artificially raised, could dry lands near the channel be found, and often as the Water Witch plowed her way steadily against the swift current, those aboard could look over the long and low levee, to see the muddy water beyond as it swept over low-lying plantations or tore its way through the trees and swamps.

The surface of the river was thickly strewn with debris; huge trees tossing and rolling in the whirling water; masses of tangled drift-wood; the swollen carcasses of drowned animals; with now and then the wreck of a cabin or more pretentious building, sailing on its way to the Gulf.

Had it not been that the Water Witch carried for the most part freight that would be ruined or damaged by delay in transit, nearly all billed through to St. Louis, the officers in charge would probably have tied up at some of the river towns at which they stopped at intervals, there to wait for the flood to begin to subside, or until the worst could be learned from some downward-bound vessel. As it was, favored by a spell of clear weather, with the moon shining clearly through the nights, the Water Witch pressed on her course.

Among those who shipped as roustabouts on board the Water Witch, were Moke Horner and Yellow Jack Tandy. They were not long in discovering the unwelcome fact that two of the young bloods had been seriously injured during that affray in the dark at Maum Juny's, and by cautious inquiries, they learned still more. Moke Horner was suspected of having a hand in the game, if not being the actual ring-leader, and if caught he would certainly be "made an example of."

For this reason, among others, scarcely less potent, but which will appear in due time, Moke Horner joined the Water Witch, his peculiar reputation insuring him a place.

Among the crew were two men with whom Moke Horner instantly found himself antagonized, he could scarcely have told the reason why. The reader may better understand, when their names are given: Teddy Huke and Purty Paddy.

They both recognized the Boss Roustabout, though his appearance was now vastly different from what it had been when they watched his peculiar performance in the Tricolor. There was no trace of the sable dandy left, save in the clear-cut, Indian-like features, the graceful figure and the massive bone ring with the human skull engraved upon it.

Here, as in all other boats, Moke Horner instantly took his position as "boss" of the roustabouts. No one even so much as thought of questioning his right to the title, until Purty Paddy thrust himself forward.

The prize-fighting Irishman had not forgotten the story told by Shaky Joe that evening in the double saloon, nor forgiven the blunt hint that the negro would prove the best man should the twain ever come into open collision. Only for the strong tinge of superstition which ran through his composition, the Irishman would have tackled the ebony athlete long ere this. He could hear his messmates talking over the wonderful powers which the genuine rabbit-foot gave its possessor, and that kept him pretty well in the traces until the trip was nearly one-half completed. But then the long-smoldering enmity fairly broke out, as noted at the head of this chapter.

Moke Horner was keen-eyed enough to see what was in the wind, and though he was far from being of an ugly, quarrelsome disposition, he was always ready to fight in defense of his title as king of the roustabouts. Never more so than in this instance, for he believed he knew Purty Paddy far better than the bull-dog Irishman had any idea.

It was early night, and the roustabouts had just dispatched their supper. There was no immediate landing in prospect, and the night would in all probability be uneventful and without work for them, save when they should stop for wood. And it was during this idle spell that Purty Paddy insolently broke in on the lively chat of the negroes, prominent among whom was our old friend, Moke Horner. Laughingly the Boss Roustabout retorted, but

Purty Paddy was all aglow with rage at the hearty guffaws which burst from the darker portion of the gang at their chief's retort, and his last words were hissed out savagely, with his clinched fist thrust almost against Moke's nose.

Still laughing, the Boss Roustabout brushed the hand to one side, imitating the action with his own muscular paw.

"An' dar's you' mist'ess, Irish! She weigh a ton, an' hit two fousand pounds when she come down in good airnest!"

"Augh! ye black devil! hit a mon whin he ain't luckin', will ye?" cried Purty Paddy, greedily snatching at the frail excuse to precipitate the fight he had been looking for.

As he spoke he shot out his bony fists, one after the other in swift succession, in the "double" which had made him famous in the annals of the "magic circle," but not with the same degree of success on which he so surely calculated.

A lightning movement of the bare left arm, strong as though composed of steel itself, a rapid duck and swaying of the head, foiled both blows, and then, with a crack like that of a sledge-hammer striking on tightly-packed earth, Moke Horner sent his right fist home, full between the eyes, and Purty Paddy was lifted clear off his feet and hurled more than his own length away.

The face of the Boss Roustabout was no longer laughing. He knew that it would take more than one blow, even severe as this, to dispose of the pretension of this claimant for the honors which had been exclusively his for so many years. His eyes were flaming redly, and he was about to leap upon his fallen enemy like a hungry tiger when a stern voice rung out:

"Go slow, therel! If there's got to be any fighting done, I'm going to do it—you hear, Moke Horner?"

A burly, broad-shouldered man stood between them, his muscular hands gripping a heavy club, and one glance into his stern set face was enough to convince even the most skeptical that he meant every word he uttered, too. In addition, he possessed authority at his back, being chief mate of the boat.

"Dat's all yight, marse mate," muttered Moke, with an ugly glare at the Irishman, who was just struggling to his feet. "You know me. You know I don't pick fuss wid no man. But you don't ax a body to 'tan' up an' be knocked down widout tryin' fo' git eben, do you?"

"Don't listen to the dirty lies av the bloody naygur, mate, dear!" cried Purty Paddy, rising and brushing the blood from his face. "Luk at that, now! An honest white gentleman bloodied in the face av him be the fisth av a naygur baboon! An' me not a-luckin' at the toime! An' all beca'se I shuspected the black devil o' st'al'in' me 'backy! Sure, mate, dear, you won't go fer to defend the dirty thafe like that?"

"Dat 'fernal lie when you say I 'teal from you!" flashed the Boss Roustabout, his blue eyes glittering like balls of fire. "You heap wuss dan t'ief, anyhow! Wha' you yun 'way from O'leans fo'? Wha' you do wid dat white man you stick an' shoot dat night when de row at Maum Jinny's?"

"Ye dirty naygur, what ye mane?" snarled Purty Paddy, his face turning pale even through its mask of blood and dirt.

"De bobbies wid dar hold-um-tights tell you some, soon's dis boat git to St. Louey, an' den de rope-collar man show you all de rest," laughed Moke Horner, with a meaning leer. "Wha' fo' you got you' head tie up like dat? Somebody slug you dar wif a sling-shot, eh?"

Purty Paddy glared ferociously at the black, whose meaning he could no longer mistake, then he turned to the mate, his voice trembling with passion, but coupled with a fawning whine that was disgusting in itself.

"Arrah, mate, dear! you hear the ugly baboon t'rowin' his dirty scutts in the face av me! An' to think that ye kin be so harrd-hearted as to stan' atwane the devil's spawn an' the good dose av better medicine that w'd cure him av sich low-down thricks foriver an' amin! Ye're white yersilf, honey, an' ye w'dn't loike it flung up to ye that a dirty naygur bloodied the face an' blacked the two eyes av one av your own color widout payin' the price av it? Jist turn the back an' close the eyes av ye for wan minnit—sure, it's no more than that little I'm askin'! Jist wan round, an' I'll lave him so purty that his mither wid the long tail w'dn't know him in a month av Sundays—so I will!"

"Do it—do it, boss!" grated Moke Horner, now fully on fire. "It's got to come sometime. He pickin' on me all de while. He flinks he make better boss den me, an' yight now de bes' time fo' settle dat 'spute."

"I'll have no fighting here," was the stern reply.

"Den let eberybody look out!" cried the hoodoo man, uplifting one hand in which he held his magical charm. "Fo' de last time I say it! I wuk de rabbit-foot on dis boat an' all dat's in it, ef you say no!"

Like a flock of chickens when a hawk swoops down among them, the negroes scattered, with low cries and muttered ejaculations of super-

stitious terror. The mate turned a trifle pale, not because he was at all superstitious, but he knew full well what a terrible power the angry negro held, should he see fit to exercise it without mercy.

Moke Horner brought his hands together, slowly breathing on the rabbit-foot as he rolled it between his palms. His eyes glittered like those of an angry cat in the dark, and low muttered incantations hissed through his clinched teeth. The black crowded still further away from him, and some among their number even glanced out at the swiftly flowing water as though meditating that hasty means of escaping from a surely doomed steamer.

"Augh, mate, darlint, ye see the bloody naygur will hev it fer all ye kin say—thin why not lit out the job of coolin' his hot blood to Purty Paddy? Sure, 'tisn't the loikes av him that kin run this big boat while the son av me mither is betwane the two soides av her, so it ain't! To the devil wid his rabbit-fut! Sure, I'll lick him nately, an' thin swally his dirty charm for to kape me supper down!"

"Let them fight it out, your honor," respectfully uttered Teddy Huke, coming forward and touching his hat. "The nigger has been running over us all ever since the boat put out from Orleans, and unless he gets a set-back from some one of us, there won't be room enough aboard to hold him, short of the captain's cabin. He begun the row with Paddy."

"I don't like it," hesitated the mate, reluctantly. "It is contrary to all discipline."

"Better two men fight dan twenty leabe you at fust landin'," tersely uttered Moke Horner.

"I know your power, curse you!" growled the mate, clinching his club as though longing to fell the sullen negro to the deck. "It will be a glad day when you turn your toes up for good and all! If I was only captain on board this boat, I'd lay you by the heels if every other dog of them ran away the next moment!"

Moke Horner made no reply, but, squatted down, holding his rimless felt hat on his knees, the rabbit-foot resting on the crushed-in top, he resumed his weird incantations.

Crushing a fierce curse between his teeth, the mate said:

"I'll go put the case before the old man. What he says will decide it. He bosses me, and if he is willing for you to fight it out, I'll see fair play. But mark this: If you get to blows while I'm gone, I'll open fire on you—and I'll shoot to kill, every time!"

Turning away without another word, he sought out the captain, who was in the office above. Drawing him aside, the mate stated how matters stood below.

"You know what that infernal nigger is, when he once gets his back up in good earnest. You know how it will be with the other mokes if he is let go on with his cursed rabbit-foot business they'll leave us like rats at the first landing."

"We'll be at the wood-landing before long. Let them go ashore then and have it out."

"The darks will half of them never come back, then, no matter if their man should win. If he loses, not one will ever board the Water Witch again."

"There isn't room for them to have a fair shake aft?"

The mate shook his head negatively.

"Well, if they must have it out, clear a place for them in the bows, and see that they get their fill for once. By the way, what sort of a man is it after Moke?"

"Purty Paddy—the ring fighter, you remember."

"Think he can get away with him? Safe to bet on?"

"You must be judge of that," with a dry laugh. "You know the nigger. I prefer keepin' my money in my own pocket."

While this hasty conversation was going on above, tongues were equally busy below. Moke ceased his talking to his rabbit-foot, but his retort came swift to a taunt from Paddy or his bosom companion, Teddy Huke.

"Bes' fo' you keep quiet, little boy-man," he grated, with an ugly look at the thief. "I know you too. You 'long him dat night when man killed. You git mark' wid sling-shot too, ef dis niggah ain't bad mistook. You yun off in heap hurry, dat time, but you don' yun so fas' dat Moke couldn't mark you so he kin sw'ar to you when de yight time come."

"Don't you throw out your lying hints at me, nigger, unless you're aching for a dose of steel between the short-ribs for your slander!" grated Huke, showing his sharp teeth.

"Hoo! you got kill' enough on you' han's, one would flak, to las' fo' little time," laughed the reckless negro. "You shoot an' cut de gemman what wasn't lookin' fo' no sech ugly thricks, an' you fink you git heap money, den pitch de body ober in de drink, mebbe. But you didn't do des so—not much! You hear man come, an' you yun away like debble aft'er you wid red-hot pitch-fo'kl! You lay low fo' good while, an' you fink it all yight ag'in fo' you. Dar ain't nobody foun', but dey ain't no queschums axed, neider. You fink man die widout tellin' who kill' him. Dat so—man dead; he nebb'er speak, nebb'er know who cut

him—but one udder know, an' dat udder he tell de police des what he see. Dey on hunt, now. Dey be at every landin' on de watch fo' you' comin'. You git cotch, suah!"

"Augh, what ye drivin' at, ye loose tongued naygur?" Purty Paddy sniffed loftily. "To the devil wid your murtherers an' your polace! Give us a rist, won't ye?"

CHAPTER XI.

PURTY PADDY SEES A GHOST.

THE worthy captain rubbed the tip of his nose dubiously, as though he did not exactly relish the situation.

"If the infernal rascals had only buckled to and had it out without asking permission! If they take an idea into their heads that we can be bullied into giving them their own way, they'll keep us in hot water from morning till night! Why couldn't you see and say nothing, Devlin?"

"So I would, had it been any other than Moke Horner," was the half-sullen reply. "The black rascal totes the rabbit-foot; and if the fool niggers should take it into their heads that he was being abused—well, you know what would follow as well as I can tell you."

The captain did know only too well. Though he frequently disavowed his belief in voodooism, swearing that no man ever drew the breath of life who was more entirely free from superstition than himself, this mention of the rabbit-foot made anything but a comfortable impression upon him just then.

"I'm not blaming you, old fellow," he made haste to add. "After all, what matter? The ladies are all in their own cabin, and we can manage it so that they need know nothing about it. As for the male passengers, it will be a change from the card-tables—all right, old fellow! Go you and make arrangements for the scrapping match. Or stay—I'll just run down and have a word and a look—I never saw that Purty Paddy close at hand, but they say he's a tough nut to crack. Yet you think Moke can get away with him?"

"I didn't say so," replied the mate, with a silent laugh, as the bustling little captain led the way down the broad flight of stairs to the lower deck.

Captain Miles was a thoroughbred sport, when that term was held in far higher esteem than it is at the present day, and Mate Devlin had little doubt from the first what would be the result of his mission. He knew that his superior officer would not miss such a chance of winning or losing a few dollars, debarred as he was by his position from the card-tables.

"What's the matter with you two rascals, anyhow?" demanded Captain Miles, as he gained the scene of the dispute. "It's just like the infernal impudence of you roustabouts to demand a landing so that you can pull hair and scratch faces to settle your little squabbles! You, Moke! that rabbit-foot of yours will bring you to the end of a rope one of these fine days. And you," turning abruptly toward the prize-fighter and catching him by the arm, dextrously feeling of his muscles, "won't be satisfied without tackling the cock of the walk—and by the Lord Harry! I believe you'll pull out his tail-feathers, too!"

"Av I don't, cap'n, dear," grinned the gratified Irishman, "ye kin use me fer a shwab to scrub up the flures wid!"

"De cap'n too high gemplum to do sech wuk, you low-down ign'ant bog-trotter!" sniffed the ebony athlete with lofty scorn. "Moke Horner sabe him dat trouble, dough. You git mopped 'round 'nuff fo' settle you' supper, nebb'er you fret!"

Not a little confused by the situation into which his enthusiasm had placed him without thought, Captain Miles turned away with the mate, hastily whispering:

"You arrange matters, and give them an equal show. Let them fight it out until one gets enough, but then stop it. We can't afford to lose a good man while the water is on the boom like this. Get to work—and put your ducats on the little Irisher!"

With these words the jolly captain hastened to the cabin deck, eager to give a favored few of his sporting passengers the "tip" and place guards to prevent any of the ladies from straying to the front of the boat, thus becoming shocked witnesses of what promised to be a desperate struggle.

Now that the fight was fairly decided upon, the rivals became almost painfully polite in their actions toward each other. As for Moke Horner, his short-lived anger had entirely vanished, and he was jolliest of the jolly while the mate was directing the clearance of the bows sufficiently to give them room for the struggle.

Meanwhile the captain had not wasted his time, and the semi-circular space above was crowded by eager spectators, some with books and pencils out, all watching for a glimpse of the rival roustabouts. It was an age of betting, and already men who had never seen nor heard of either man before that hour, were placing their money on the one their fancy selected as the winner.

Two huge iron crates were filled up with light wood and tar, and blazed up grandly as the

arena was pronounced in readiness for the gladiators by the mate. The red glare streamed far ahead over the muddy, turbulent, swiftly flowing water, showing the many floating objects which told of such widespread ruin and desolation which was yet to be passed.

Purty Paddy was the first to enter the imaginary ring, stripped to his shoes and coarse overalls. His closely-cropped head, seamed with scars and cuts, showed the very ideal of a tough scrapper, and from the narrow space between and each side of the huge smoke-stacks, came the sounds of eager offers to bet at odds on the white. In very few cases these offers were closed with, but the majority preferred waiting for a sight of the other man before placing their money.

They were not long in suspense, Moke Horner, stripped to the waist, his skin shining like freshly-oiled ebony, his muscles working like tempered steel with his slightest motion, his magnificent torso forming a strong contrast to the thick-set body of his rival, leaped lightly forward into the full glow of the fire-crates. He doffed his battered felt hat, making a sweeping bow to the gentlemen above, before casting the dilapidated head-covering into the face of fat Tandy, uttering a mellow, rollicking laugh as the yellow boy started back, tripping over a mischievous foot and coming down on his beam-ends with a tremendous jar and sonorous grunt!

One breathless stare from the eager eyes above, during which the sports took in each detail with practiced skill, then the betting began afresh in the upper regions, the odds now equalized and the choice varying rapidly from one to the other of the gladiators.

Below, the speculation was even more ardent, though conducted on a more moderate scale. The crew of roustabouts was about evenly divided as to numbers between black and white, and each section backed the representative of their own race. Money and personal property, even to the clothes on their backs and the shoes on their feet were recklessly wagered during the few moments consumed by Mate Devlin in cautioning the rival roustabouts.

"You two fellows wanted a fight, and now you're going to get your fill. We can't waste time in making a landing for any such small matter, nor are we prepared here to make a regulation ring. One of you is going to get whipped enough to keep quiet for the rest of the trip, and as the shortest method of getting to that end, you can go in rough-and-tumble if you like—only mind: no foul play! I'll crack the skull of the one who tries to make use of other weapons than those nature armed you with. You understand?"

"Thin it's a bloody scramble ye're wantin', mate, dear!" asked Purty Paddy, looking a little bit disappointed. "Why not give the gentleman the worth ov their money, by athickin' to the good ould rules? Not that it's Purty Paddy that kicks, av ye think the scramble is the better!"

"I eat him an' he rules too, marse mate," grinned the ebony athlete. "Bes' say de wud pow'ful hasty, boss, or de po' debble git so mighty bad skeer he melt an' yun down in he ole shoe—he des will!"

"Four to three, in hundreds, on the black boy!" cried out a clear voice from the guards above, and Purty Paddy started as though he had received a stinging blow, his little eyes distended to their utmost capacity as he glared at the dimly-visible faces above.

Was it only fancy, or had he heard that voice before? Was it only an echo from the black past, or had—bab! He lowered his staring eyes, shaking his head like an angry bull as he drove the chilling doubt away.

"With knife or pistol, in the dark, and attacking a man who suspects no such peril, I'd back the white thug; but give the black boy a common slung-shot, and he would get away with the Irishman and another just like him!" came that clear and cold voice from the upper regions.

It was a curious speech for a person to make under the existing circumstances, and probably there were not more than three or four persons within earshot at that moment who had a clew to the enigma. One of these most clearly was Purty Paddy, for his stocky form shook as though under a violent chill, and he glared around him as though about to seek safety in flight from some dreaded enemy.

Indeed, so plain was his discomposure that one of the sports who had wagered his money freely upon him against the black athlete, uttered a curse of angry disgust as he glared around in quest of the man who uttered the words.

"Fair play, gentlemen! fair play is all we ask for the little man, and that no gentleman will refuse us!"

The sharp emphasis pointed his meaning, but there came no answer. If not frightened off, the mysterious speaker evidently believed he had scored the desired point.

"Get down to it, you rascals!" suddenly cried the mate.

Active as a cat, Moke Horner leaped to the middle of the cleared space, throwing himself into a position with a freedom and grace that proved him no novice in the then highly esteemed art of manly defense.

Like a war-horse scenting battle, Purty Paddy seemed to cast aside all other thoughts but how to dispose of his tall rival in the neatest and surest manner. On his hard-favored mug was the stereotyped grin with which he invariably began his battles, and it is a characteristic fact of others besides Paddy, that he never liked a man better than when facing him in a fair fight.

While both were confident of ultimate success, each seemed to feel that there was hard work and harder knocks ahead, and they sparred for some little time, busied in taking notes.

Moke Horner was the first to lead off, shooting out his left at the grinning mug before him, which Purty Paddy avoided by a sudden duck, then rising and shooting out his famous "double," after the style which later made Tom Sayers so formidable an antagonist.

With nine men out of ten, Purty Paddy would have succeeded in gaining his point, which would almost certainly have ended the fight in his favor ere many more rounds, but not so with the eagle-eyed negro. Just as he had once that night foiled those vicious cuts, so now Moke eluded the blows and sent out his heavy right in countering. Temporarily without a guard, Purty Paddy could only jerk back his head, which he lost no time in doing, though unable to wholly elude the stroke. It alighted on his chin, with a sharp crack that sent a cold chill over more than one of the spectators, for it seemed as though the jaw bone had given way.

Purty Paddy leaped back to keep from falling, and Moke swiftly followed up his advantage, raining in heavy blows that would almost any of them have put to sleep an ordinary man. But the Irishman was tough as a pine-knot, and though he received severe punishment before he could perfect his guard, he at length managed to do this, and for the first time his bony fist visited the face of his rival. It was a nasty blow, and a little trickle of blood followed it. Swiftly the white followed up his advantage, and in his turn Moke Horner was forced to give ground.

Then, as though finding himself outdone in pure science, the Boss Roustabout ducked his head and impetuously rushed to a close. Fiercely Purty Paddy struck out, one fist seeking the victimizing department while the other came in a vicious upper-cut that would have knocked the life out of any common man. As it was, the blow raised the head of the negro to an upright position, and then, their arms intertwining, their tempered muscles swelling and straining, they reeled to and fro in a fierce struggle for the fall.

The excitement among the spectators was now intense. So far the "sport" had been of a far higher order than any of them had anticipated from two roustabouts and under no regular rules of fighting. Each man had shown no mean degree of skill, while for such a brief space, both proved themselves as willing to take punishment as to inflict it.

For full a minute that fierce struggle lasted, then the taller black fairly lifted the white clear of the deck, whirling his feet upward, then casting him with deadly force to the deck, head-foremost.

"Broke his neck, by the eternal!" cried one excited man.

But Purty Paddy was of better and tougher stuff than all that came to, and to the astonishment of all, none more so than the Boss Roustabout, he rolled swiftly over, then scrambled to his feet with hands up guarding his face!

"A pity such a gritty rascal is doomed to pull beamp!"

Sharp and cutting came the words from above, and in the same tones that had so startled Paddy before. Mechanically he glanced upward, and then a wild yell of terror escaped his lips as he dropped his hands and turned to flee.

"It's the divil! It's the ghost av the did mon comin' after me—whirroo!" he screamed, then plunged headlong over the edge of the boat, disappearing in the mad waters!

CHAPTER XII.

GROPING IN THE DARK.

WHILE the rival roustabouts were preparing to settle their dispute once for all by an appeal to nature's weapons, other events were taking place on the hurricane deck of the Water Witch in which some of our characters were deeply interested. To explain their exact purport, it is necessary to take a brief retrospective glance, back a few weeks in time, and some hundreds of miles in distance.

When Horace Ward dismissed his very unwelcome visitors on that eventful day, there was scarcely the ghost of a hope left in his troubled mind. The story told by Shaky Joe was so circumstantial, so straightforward, so well fortified by proofs apparently covering every point, that it was enough in itself to breed serious doubts as to the innocence of Marcus Dineon, even had the young lawyer manfully confronted his accuser and asserted parent. But this he had not done. After having pledged his sacred parole, he had broken it without even sending a message in excuse.

This conduct left only two evils to choose from: either Marcus Dineon was really the

scheming traitor Shaky Joe so positively charged him with being, or else there had been a merciless crime committed the more perfectly to conceal dastardly plotting.

Poor Drusilla, stricken down with what promised to become a dangerous spell of brain fever, but who was truly loyal even in her wildest delirium, clung to the last terrible alternative, moaning or shrieking in fancy over the ghastly corpse of her murdered lover.

Horace Ward would almost certainly have taken this view of the young lawyer's absence at such an important crisis, had it not been for the appearance of the woman who claimed to be the wife of Marcus Dineon. Though an honest, God-fearing man himself, the merchant was no novice in city life behind the scenes. He knew that many men habitually led a double life; that cases had been known where a man had kept two establishments in the same city, each one provided with a wife and family of children, between whom he divided his time so nicely and played his part so perfectly that neither wife so much as suspected him of the slightest infidelity, much less of such wonderful duplicity as this.

Knowing all this, Horace Ward could readily understand how it might be that Marcus Dineon had been married almost a year without that important fact becoming general property; yet it did not seem possible that he could have been so thoroughly deceived in the young lawyer. A conscienceless schemer like this, where he had believed naught but the very soul of honor was to be found! It was simply impossible, and he mentally vowed to believe it only when proof was piled on proof, and the smallest atom of doubt was crushed beneath the damning evidence.

When he dismissed his unwelcome guests, with the wild laugh and hysterical cries of his loved daughter ringing in their ears while crossing the threshold, Horace Ward told himself this, resolving to set out at once in quest of the missing man; but when he stood beside his moaning daughter, and gazed tremblingly into the very grave face of their family physician, he forgot all else but the deadly peril which threatened his only child.

For one full week he scarcely left her bedside, night nor day, as though his mere presence could frighten back the grim angel of death without its lovely prey. For seven long days and weary nights, he sat beside her, listening to the piteous appeals which she sent up—not that her lover might clear himself from the damning charges which had been brought forward against him, but that the deadly weapons of the cowardly assassins might be turned aside by the hand of the Lord.

But then came the turn in the tide, and with tears dimming his old eyes, the doctor bade the haggard parents hope—that their daughter was restored to them, even from the jaws of death! Until then Mrs. Ward had fought against her own illness, but now her fictitious powers abruptly failed her, and instead of one, the doctor had two seriously-ill patients on his hands.

It was nearly another week before Drusilla gained sufficient strength to speak of the sad past, but her first words were of Marcus Dineon dead, not living; she asked if the body had yet been discovered!

It was in vain that Horace Ward endeavored to remove this belief. If he had not come forward to face the base calumniators, and crush their foul lies with the power of truth and innocence, then it was because they had ruthlessly murdered him before striking their cruel blows at her heart.

Scarce knowing what to think, Horace Ward set out on his blind search, endeavoring to solve the black mystery which overhung the case.

No one could tell him anything of Marcus Dineon. He had not returned to his lodgings after he left them to attend the birth-night party at the Ward mansion. No one had seen him in or near his office since that same eventful day. He had vanished as completely as though the earth had opened to swallow him up as a human sacrifice.

One whole day Horace Ward spent in questioning those with whom Marcus Dineon had associated most intimately, putting his questions as guardedly as possible, but when night came, it was only to find him wearied and still more completely befogged. On the second day, he obtained what at first he regarded as a gleam of hope—not that Marcus Dineon was true, but that he had not met with the terrible death so often pictured by Drusilla in her wild delirium.

One Gideon Gillespie, a gay and dashing gentleman about town, and a former very ardent suitor for the hand of his daughter, told Horace Ward that he had caught a glimpse of a man, shortly after the ball, on board a coaster which was just leaving the wharf, bound for New York; and that man he was ready to take oath, was none other than the missing lawyer. Nor could the closest questions shake his confidence, though he frankly admitted that the glimpse was brief, and that the man was evidently in disguise.

Wearily Horace Ward turned to the police, and then sought for Shaky Joe. He found that his check had been cashed, early on the day it

fell due, but that was the only clew he could obtain so far as the fellow was concerned. He sought for the policeman who had promised to keep an eye on him, only to meet with a startling revelation. No such man was on the force, nor had he ever been a member!

Confused, utterly befogged, Horace Ward told the chief of police the whole story, and placed the matter wholly in his hands to straighten out, if that were possible. He began to suspect anew that he and his were the victims of most cunning and thoroughly unscrupulous conspirators. But with what end in view? Surely the few hundreds which Shaky Joe obtained that evening, would not repay them for their trouble or the peril which they ran?

The chief of police, through his many hands, quickly performed what Horace Ward failed in. Shaky Joe was found, and put to the question. He frankly answered all their questions, and closely as they pressed him, there was not a single flaw to be found in his story. He knew nothing of the man whom they denounced as a counterfeit. A servant had been sent out to bring an officer, and this fellow returned with him. The merchant accepted him as genuine, and placed him, Shaky Joe, in his charge. Nothing in his words or conduct gave him any cause for doubting that he was just what he claimed to be, and the prisoner, at least, acted in perfect good faith.

He gave them the address of the woman who claimed to be the wife of Marcus Dineon, and there they found her, sick, almost starving, though she had plenty of money and rich jewels on her person. She begged them to let her alone, to find in death the happiness which was denied her in life.

Food and drink were forced upon her, and then, revived in both body and mind, she repeated her story of woman's love and trust, of man's infidelity and falsehood.

Left an orphan when just crossing the line which separates the woman from the child, Rose Enright found herself obliged to earn her own living, and bravely she set about it.

A year later she met a handsome young gentleman whose attentions became very pointed, and ere long she knew that the earth without his love would be but a dreary desert. Her maiden heart went out to him without reserve, and when his brief visit to the Northern city was brought to a close, they were under engagements to be married at some not-distant day.

He told her that he was a lawyer, living at New Orleans, enjoying a good income, and that as soon as he could complete his arrangements he would send for her, and they would be married in the city which was to be their happy home for the future. In her happiness at this joyous prospect, Rose confided all to the woman with whom she lived, a distant relative. She, without saying as much in so many words, suspected a snare was being sprung on her young charge, and when the long-looked-for letter came, summoning Rose to New Orleans, the woman went with her.

Apparently her fears were without the slightest foundation in fact, for the eager lover greeted her kindly, and at once proposed that she become a witness to their marriage. She consented, and together they rode to a retired house, where a grave, kindly-faced man of an advanced age met and welcomed them. In his company they went to a neighboring church, and the ceremony was performed in due form.

Her fears and doubts fully dissipated, the good woman soon bade the happy couple adieu, and returned to her Northern home, only to sicken and die within a month thereafter.

The chief of police looked serious as he heard this fact, for as he glanced at the certificate of marriage, he could see that she alone had signed as witness. He knew the clergyman well by repute, and he knew that he had been blind from early manhood. It was before the days of photographs, and it happened that there was no likeness of Marcus Dineon in existence.

The chief had formed a theory, wild and fanciful at the first thought perhaps, but which he believed would be justified by the curious events which had already occurred. He believed the entire plot was aimed at the fortune which would surely fall to Drusilla Ward on the death of her parents. He believed the man who concocted the intricate scheme feared Marcus Dineon would win her love, and to hold a terrible weapon in reserve, he had married this poor girl, assuming the name of another man!

He described the young lawyer as carefully and closely as he could, and Rose Enright unhesitatingly declared that the description perfectly fitted her husband. Then, though with great reluctance, the chief was forced to abandon his very improbable theory, and search for another one which would better fit the case.

Secretly as these investigations were carried on, and carefully as Horace Ward guarded the skeleton which had so suddenly taken up its abode in his house, to his dismay and intense irritation, he found that the story had been spread over the whole city, in a single day. And as though the truth was not bad enough, there were countless variations, some of which

declared that Marcus Dineon had deliberately jilted the rich merchant's daughter, having detected her in very questionable relations with a notorious sporting man of the town. Though no name was given to this latter personage, the hints were sufficiently plain, and then it was that Gideon Gillespie sought a private interview with Horace Ward and renewed his oft-rejected suit. A speedy marriage was the best and surer method of silencing all scandalous tongues, he said, and pledged his word that if consent and permission were given him, he would nip the base scandals in the bud, though he had to call out half of the city and horse-whip the other moiety.

In his sore extremity, Horace Ward was inclined to yield, but when he broached the subject to Drusilla, who was now rapidly recovering her strength, she indignantly refused.

"I loathe and detest him as completely as I love Marcus! Let them say what they please. I know that he is true to me, be he alive or be he dead. If he never comes back to me in this world, I will join him in another, pure and faithful as when he left me in this, to go down to his death!"

But boldly as she spoke, as the days crept on without word or tidings from the missing man, Drusilla grew pale and weaker, until the doctor told the merchant that she would not live to see another year begin, unless she was taken where she could have change of air and scene. Mrs. Ward, too, was very feeble, never having recovered from that terrible day, and so Horace Ward concluded to dispose of his business and leave the Crescent City for good and all.

This he found no difficulty in doing, and when the good boat Water Witch steamed away from the wharf and breasted the muddy current of the Mississippi, then "bank-full," the Ward family were noted on her books as passengers.

Before leaving New Orleans, Drusilla had insisted on an interview with the chief of police, and in his hands she left the duty of tracing out Marcus Dineon, dead or alive. If the first, he was to spare neither pains nor expense to bring his assassin to justice. In addition, he was to carefully investigate the antecedents of the woman who claimed to be married to the young lawyer; all of which he gravely promised to do.

Faring the results, Horace Ward had never told Drusilla how completely the woman had proven her claim on Marcus.

For a few days after leaving New Orleans, Drusilla did not leave her state-room even at meal-time, sitting for the most part by her mother, who seemed very low. And then when she did occupy a seat at the long table, almost the first person whose face she saw, seated just where ran the now vacant grooves for the sliding doors which separated the two cabins at night, was her persistent suitor, Gideon Gillespie.

After this, dreading another stormy scene with him, Drusilla kept close to her state-room, only taking the air after dark, and then in charge of her father.

On this evening, they were slowly promenading to and fro near the stern of the Water Witch, on the hurricane-deck, when the colored stewardess brought Horace Ward a message from his wife. She desired to see him for a moment, and bidding Drusilla await his return, he hastened below.

Though she gazed steadily out over the wide waste of waters, Drusilla saw nothing of it all. She was wondering how, if ever, this black cloud would be lifted from her life, when the quick tramp of a foot on the graveled floor startled her.

"Father!" she exclaimed, fancying it her returning parent. "Does mother wish to see me?"

She started back with a low cry as she recognized the mistake she had made, but a firm hand closed on her arm before she could turn away, and a stern voice uttered:

"Make a scene, if you prefer, Miss Ward, but now I have found the opportunity so long denied me, you must listen to what I have to say."

"If you are a gentleman, Gideon Gillespie, you will remove your hand and suffer me to go below. My mother is very ill, and she requires my presence," coldly said the maiden, striving bravely to conceal the apprehension which she really felt.

"You may go—but not just yet, Miss Ward," was the low, determined reply. "You have denied me whenever I took the customary method of gaining an interview. You refused to see me, or to answer the notes I wrote you."

"Because I knew no good could come of our meeting," was the steady retort. "All the answer I had to make, was given you months ago, when you honored me by proposing marriage. You said that you wished to plead your cause anew, and it was this resolve, not your society, as such, that I objected to. All you could say would not alter my decision, and in hopes of sparing us both annoyance if not positive pain, I declined to see you. I hoped you would accept that hint as final. At least, I never dreamed of your taking such ungentle-

manly means to force your company upon me, when you must know it is unwelcome!"

The man stood in silence until she ceased speaking; then he replied, still holding her wrist in his firm grasp:

"I have listened to you patiently, though your words contain a sting sharper than the tooth of a poisonous serpent! Now it is your turn to listen to me."

"You will only waste both time and breath—"

"I am well provided with both," was the dry retort. "Do not oblige me to be so discourteous as to use force. I must, if you refuse to listen to me of your own accord. I am desperate now—I know that nothing I can do will make my cause more hopeless. Yet I have one more plea to make."

"Speak, then, but be as brief as possible," coldly rejoined Drusilla, casting an anxious glance around in hopes of seeing the returning figure of her father.

"You know how long and ardently I have loved you," the gambler uttered, his voice low and passionate. "It has been the one bright dream—the one sweet hope that has cheered me on through an otherwise bleak and dreary life! I can hardly recall the day when I did not love you. If I could, it would be back of our first meeting, when you was no more than a little girl—for even then I registered a silent vow to woo and win you for my wife when you grew up to be a woman!"

"You were foolish and visionary. That dream will never become a reality. I told you as much when you first broached this subject," coldly uttered Drusilla, trying to free her hand from that close grasp.

A short, hard laugh parted the lips of the man.

"I know you did, but I had nursed that hope for too many years to cast it aside forever at a single rebuff. You don't know me yet, Miss Ward, or you would not think that!"

"I know that I do not—I cannot ever love you as you wish. I know that every interview with you but deepens that resolve. And now each word that you utter only serves to raise the barrier still higher between us."

"It is a barrier that I will tear down or over-leap," was the almost fierce reply. "When I set my mind on any certain point, I always reach it, by fair means or by foul. I swore long ago that I would win and wear you—I repeat that vow now, and call you to bear witness. If you give me anything like a fair chance, I will woo you as gently, as chivalrously, as ever knight wooed fair lady! I will be your humble slave, to do your bidding without a murmur, if only you will let the prize shine before me at not too great a distance. I will yield to your slightest whims, and—"

"Yet you refuse to release my hand!" scornfully.

"Because I have watched and waited too long for this opportunity to lose it now, before I have unburdened my heart," was the quick retort. "Give me the promise I ask, and see how completely I will be your slave. Marry me—"

"That I will never do!" cried the maiden, impulsively. "Once for all, I vow that I will never wed you!"

CHAPTER XIII.

PURE GOLD AND BASE ALLOY.

CLEAR and distinct came her reply. Not loud nor vehement, but none the less it showed how very frail was the hope that Gideon Gillespie would ever succeed in winning her hand, to leave her heart entirely out of the question.

Yet there was nothing in his handsome, clear-cut features to show that he despaired of ultimate success; his warm fingers still grasped her wrist as they stood near the stern of the heavily-laden boat; there was a dogged resolution in his deep, mellow tones as he made answer:

"It is vow against vow, then, and the mind that is strongest will carry the day in the end! I have sworn to win you—I repeat that oath, now that you have flung your defiance in my teeth! You think you hate me now, but I would rather have your bitterest enmity than the hottest love of any other woman in all this wide world! If you hate, I am not wholly indifferent to you—you must sometimes give me a thought, even if an unpleasant one."

"Slight consolation, one would think!"

"Nevertheless I find it one," was the quick response.

"Then make the most of it, for if my sentiments ever experience a change, it will be to hate and despise you more intensely than I have ever since you dropped your mask to show in your true colors—a despicable persecutor of a weak woman under the pretense of love—bah! You know not the meaning of the term!"

"Then you shall teach me," with a short, hard laugh.

With a swift motion, Drusilla strove to free her wrist from his grasp, but without success.

"Unhand me, sir, or I will cry aloud for help!" she exclaimed, her voice ringing with maidenly indignation.

"Do so if you will, but I beg of you to first consider the cost. No man can lay the weight of his hand on me and live to make a boast of it. I mean to keep you here until we can come to some definite understanding. If your father or any other man tries to come between us before that point is gained, the risk be his or theirs!"

"You would not murder him?" gasped the startled girl.

"Not unless you compel me," was the cold retort. "It is not so much that I ask: merely a few minutes of your time and company. The day was when you were not so chary!"

"When I believed you something of a gentleman—before you proved yourself to be both cowardly and cruel!"

"Say rather, before you grew so infatuated with that insolent puppy, Marcus Dineon?" was the fierce, grating retort. "Do you think I have been blind? That I could not see how the game was going—why you so suddenly grew cold toward me?"

"That is false," was the quiet reply. "I treated you with politeness, if not with cordiality, until you showed how base and hollow were your pretensions to the name of gentleman. Even then, I would have kept up the farce, had you not striven to gain your ends by vilely calumniating one who is as far above you as Heaven is above Hades!"

"It is a pity the gentleman is not present to hear your extravagant eucumiums!" with a short, unpleasant laugh.

"Were he present, you most certainly would not dare use such a tone! You would fall on your knees at his feet and humbly beg his pardon for slandering him and annoying me, for fear of worse befalling you!"

A sudden change came over the man. His flippant tone changed to one deep and earnest, though growing bolder and colder as he proceeded:

"Enough of this idle recrimination, Miss Ward. I think we can spend the time far more profitably in plainly discussing the situation. Will you listen to me?"

"Until my father returns. Then I will appeal to him to rid me of your intensely disagreeable presence."

"And thereby lose either a true lover or a fond parent! But let it go at that. There is a more interesting subject to discuss just now."

"A moment since you charged me with being a vile calumniator. I will not affect to doubt your real meaning. You alluded to Marcus Dineon, of course?"

"I do not deny it," was the low but steady response. "You told my father that you saw him stealing away from Orleans in disguise, like a fugitive from justice!"

"I did, and I repeat that assertion. I saw him on board a coaster. He wore a disguise—the rough garb of a common sailor. I did not suspect the whole truth then, else I would have collared him and dragged him back like the cowardly, unprincipled cur he has proven himself!"

Sternly, fiercely he spoke, but keenly as his words must have cut the loving heart that listened, Drusilla laughed in tones of utter contempt.

It seemed to allay the rising tempest in the breast of Gideon Gillespie, for his tones immediately grew calm and even.

"You affect to doubt my assertion, but that it is only a hollow pretense, your hasty flight from Orleans makes perfectly clear. Had you believed him honest—had your mind really retained a doubt of his perfidy—you would have remained to face the talk of the town, instead of fleeing. You would have waited and watched for his coming, knowing that in the end truth must triumph. The idle gossip of the town would not have affected you in the least. Why, then, did you flee?"

"To regain my strength—to prepare a just but terrible vengeance on the cowardly fiends who shed his blood!"

A low, mocking laugh greeted this fervid speech, and there was a trace of pitying contempt in the tones that made reply:

"Poor girl! You try to carry it off bravely, but you must not forget that you are playing to one who is behind the scenes himself, and knows how weak and hollow is the pretense."

Drusilla made no reply, and after a brief silence he continued in the same strain:

"The cause of your sudden illness soon became an open secret throughout the city. Your father was not quite as judicious in his investigations as he might have been, and when it became known that he had called in the services of the police to discover the whereabouts of Marcus Dineon, the ten thousand tongues of rumor greedily took up the rich morsel."

"Carefully secluded as you kept yourself, you must have caught many of the swiftly-flying reports, else you would not have been so eager to leave town. The plain truth was the smallest portion of the scandal, as retailed at every club and place of public resort. It was said that Marcus Dineon had trifled with your affections, and then, to avoid the consequences, had fled secretly from the town."

The maiden shivered at this brutal speech, but made no reply, other than casting a hurried

glance toward the ladder up which she expected her father to make his reappearance.

"A few, among whom I may mention myself, learned the exact facts of the case. Marcus Dineon was already married, with a wife living less than one mile from your house. He believed the poor girl would never discover his bold and unscrupulous scheme in time to foil it; possibly he intended to put her out of the way as soon as his success with you was assured. One who would betray a lady of your standing, would scarcely hesitate at murder, if by that means he could guard against the risk of being convicted of bigamy."

"Fortunately for you, his bold plot was exposed in time, and dreading punishment, he fled in disguise."

"Every word you utter is false—false as though coined by the father of lies himself!" cried Drusilla, almost fiercely. "Marcus Dineon was a gentleman and the soul of honor! He could no more have sinned as you would have me believe, than you could do justice to the memory of a true man! If he failed to confront his accusers, it was not through fear—not because of conscious guilt—but because he was foully murdered to make the heartless plot a seeming success!"

"You will have some difficulty in making the public believe all that, Miss Ward," with a soft laugh. "The chief of police acted from the first on that belief, and only changed his mind when he discovered that it would not hold water. He found that my words were true—that Marcus Dineon really fled from the city in the disguise of a common sailor. He discovered that he had been seen and recognized by two persons in addition to myself. He has sent men on to New York, and has promised your father to inform him when the fugitive is found. But even that will not save your name or fame. All Orleans rings with the toothsome scandal. It will follow you to your new home, and poison the minds of those who might otherwise become your friends. You will meet the humiliating report wherever you turn—unless you are wise in time, and accept the only chance which remains to save your credit."

"And that, I suppose, is to still further shame my name by exchanging it for yours?" sharply uttered Drusilla, looking him full in the face as the words dropped from her lips.

"It is—if you so regard an honest union with an honest man, whose only crime lies in loving you better than aught else in earth or in heaven!" was the impetuous reply. "Give me the right to guard your honor and see justice done to your fame. I will protect you from all evil reports, and wade to my knees in the blood of the scandal-mongers, if no less thorough lesson will cure them!"

"The remedy is far more odious than the disease. Calumny I can bear, if I cannot live it down. You, I never could!" was the cold and cutting retort.

For once the forced composure of the man gave way, and he could not avoid showing how sharply her taunt stung him. His grip on her wrist grew so tight that she flinched with pain. He bent until his face was close to hers. His dark eyes glowed redly as they fixed her gaze much as a serpent charms the feebly fluttering bird.

"Beware, Miss Ward!" came hissing through his clinched teeth. "You are playing with fire when you fling such bitter taunts in my face! I hold your fame at my mercy. If I choose, I can utterly ruin your future. And if you elect to treat me as an enemy instead of a friend, I swear by all that men hold holy! to show you no mercy!"

If his temper was aroused, so was her proud and naturally imperious spirit. Fearlessly facing him, she spoke rapidly:

"At last, Gideon Gillespie, you have revealed your true nature in all its hideous loathsomeness! You show your chivalry by threatening a woman whom you believe lies helpless at the mercy of your vile tongue! You hope to win my love by vilely slandering the dead! You take advantage of your physical power to force me to listen to your words, though you know how thoroughly disgusting both they and yourself are to me."

"Now listen to me. Rather than wed you, I would embrace the corpse of a negro who had died of the small-pox—the association would be far more agreeable, and the contagion less to be feared. From the very first I have doubted and feared you. I saw that your face was a living lie, and the nature of a cowardly traitor to all that is pure and holy, showed through your eyes. Intuitively I knew that you were like a serpent in ambush—and now I have proven the correctness of that first summing up."

"You say that Marcus Dineon fled in disguise through fear of his sins finding him out. I say that you lie! In my heart I feel that my love—ay! to your teeth I say it! I love him—I love him as entirely as I loathe and despise you! I feel that he is dead—murdered—and before high Heaven I accuse you of assassinating him! I can see his dear blood upon your forehead, and sure as there is a God above to hear and record my vow, I will bring that crime home to your door and exact blood for blood, and life for life!"

Swiftly, impetuously, though in tones so low that they would not have reached the ear of one further removed than he was at that moment, Drusilla Ward poured out these words with the air of one inspired. Stout as were his nerves, Gideon Gillespie was startled and relaxed his hold. Then, with a quick spring aside, Drusilla eluded his trembling grasp and glided swiftly toward the side stairs leading to the cabin-deck. In another instant she had disappeared from his view.

Gideon Gillespie started toward the spot, as though he would not even abandon the worse than vain effort to win her love as he had enforced her attention: but then he turned with a grating oath and standing near the stern, stared moodily down at the bubbling, boiling waters as they sped rapidly by, churned to a muddy froth by the rapidly-revolving paddles.

What were his thoughts then, no man may ever know. Certainly they were not pleasant nor holy ones, from the bitter scowl which corrugated his moody brows. And could Drusilla Ward have seen his face then, even her courageous heart might well have grown sick and faint within her bosom.

To the rear of the boat, the river was cast into a darkness that was only partially dissipated by the rays of the stars and the nearly full moon. Ahead of the vessel, a broad red light was streaming, revealing objects with the distinctness almost of midday, while there came the busy hum of voices from the bows, as the rival roustabouts faced each other.

But Gideon Gillespie heard nothing of the sounds, saw naught of the light, until the slight crackling of the tar-and-gravel covered deck caused him to wheel abruptly. A short exclamation broke from his lips as he saw the figure of a woman before him, and for a moment believing it to be Drusilla, returning, he leaped to her side and caught her in his arms.

There was no resistance. Instead, the lithe form sunk tremblingly to his bosom, and a faint voice murmured:

"Marcus—my love—my husband! At last, thank God!"

CHAPTER XIV.

ROTTEN TO THE VERY CORE.

NEVER was mortal being more thoroughly surprised than was Gideon Gillespie when that broken speech came to his ear. For one instant he stood like one transfixed, then started back with a fierce curse hissing betwixt his grating teeth. His arms opened and the trembling woman would have fallen to the deck had not the further retreat of the astounded villain been checked by the huge yawl which lay bottom up close by.

"You, Rose! In the name of all that's evil—"

Gillespie checked himself abruptly, but the harm was already done, and the second thought which flashed through his plotting brain was instantly dismissed as impracticable. He could not boldly defy her after that recognition, without too plainly betraying his unscrupulous game.

Trembling like a leaf, her entire frame shaken by the hysterical sobs which she vainly strove to overpower and choke back, the woman clung to his neck. Slowly he turned his head and cast a swift, comprehensive glance around them. Clearly outlined against the broad fan of light which streamed out far in advance of the boat's bow, he could distinguish the fancifully ornamented pilot-house, inside of which were the coatless figures of two pilots, one on either side of the many-spoked wheel. He frowned darkly as he saw how very distinct their shapes were, and the cruel temptation of which that hasty look was born, nearly died away.

Yet his false arms closed around that clinging, trembling form, and he slowly moved toward the stern of the boat where the waters boiled and bubbled so madly as they whirled by to roll on without cessation until their long journey was ended and they found oblivion in the bosom of the mighty ocean.

"Rose, how came you here? Surely, angel though I have so often vowed you were, you did not drop down from heaven? You followed me from Orleans?"

His voice was entirely changed, and a stranger hearing it for the first time, would have sworn it was that of a dotingly fond lover addressing his idolized mistress.

With a little inarticulate cry, she lifted her head from his bosom, and pressed her hot lips to his, murmuring:

"You are not angry with me, Marcus? Say you are not angry because I am here!"

Gillespie made no immediate reply, but moved slowly on until they stood close to the stern railing, almost directly above the boiling, tumbling waters. He glanced keenly around them, making sure that they were alone on the upper deck.

"Am I angry, little one? That depends. I must hear your full and free confession before I grant you absolution or pronounce your penance. How came you here, and why? Of course you came aboard at New Orleans, but how is it that we have not met until now? If you had

ever appeared at table, I must have seen and recognized you—though I actually believe you have made some attempt at disguising yourself! Ha! is it a lover that I see—in fancy—before me?"

It was a very clumsy attempt at railery, but the poor woman evidently took his tragic utterance for genuine, and she clung to his neck closer than ever, eagerly exclaiming:

"Oh, Marcus! you know better! You know that I have only your image in my heart—that I can never love any other man! You know this—don't you, dear?"

Indeed he did, better far than those poor quivering lips could tell him just then, but the fancy seemed to him an admirable one for his present purpose, and he improved it.

"An hour ago, I could have taken an oath you did, without the slightest doubt or hesitation, but now—if so, why are you here, in disguise, when I left you safe in Orleans, Rose? If you have not betrayed my trust—have not fled with a favored lover—"

With a swift motion her little hand was placed over his lips, cutting short his cruel speech. And there was a trace of indignation in her tones as she uttered:

"Stop! not even you can couple my name with such burning shame! You know that I have not—that I never had a lover other than yourself!"

Gideon Gillespie gazed steadily into the upturned face for a few moments, then uttered a short, disagreeable laugh.

"So! the shoe is on the other foot, then? You believe of me what you scornfully repudiate for yourself? You fancy I am running away with another woman, and hence you have donned this disguise, the more surely to discover my falsity? Is that it, Rose?"

This was cutting dangerously close to the verge of the truth, but Gideon Gillespie had taken a comprehensive view of the facts, and he believed that he was still master of the situation. With the gloom of night above and around them—with those madly-tumbling waters below—alone on the hurricane-deck, with no eye to note, no hand to check—the unscrupulous villain felt that the game was still a winning one.

"I did not follow you knowingly, Marcus," quickly replied the woman, speaking with an earnestness which even he could not doubt was based on truth. "I never even suspected your presence aboard until less than an hour ago, when I chanced to see you with that woman and caught the sound of your voice."

"You heard what we were talking about, of course?" slowly asked Gillespie, his right arm stealing around her waist as he cast a furtive glance at the water below.

"I could hear nothing connected, was the faint, trembling response. "I only caught a word or two now and then above the roar of the wheels and the puffing of steam. I only knew you were pleading with her—for her love—and you my lawfully wedded husband!"

"A mere flirtation, such as, I dare say, you have carried on with many a handsome fellow when business called me out of the city," lightly laughed the heartless man.

"You know better than that, Marcus," more in sorrow than in anger. "Shall I tell you why I came aboard in this disguise, and why I have kept myself concealed so carefully?"

"Of course! That's what I've been trying to get at from the very first," was the impatient retort.

"I came because I learned that she—Drusilla Ward—had secured passage aboard. I resolved to keep her in sight, believing that thus I would all the sooner find you!"

"Pray explain your meaning a little more clearly, Rose," he said, as she paused with a searching glance into his face. "What reason had you for thinking that you would find me by keeping closer to Miss Ward than at home where I left you?"

"You can ask this in such cool tones? After all that has occurred? After giving cause for that shameful letter? After wooing a lovely, innocent woman to become your wife—"

"Meaning yourself, my dear?" with a heartless sneer.

"I mean Drusilla Ward!" was the steady reply, as the poor woman gained strength from the very cruelty with which she was treated. "You pretended to her that you were a single and heart-free man. You wooed her, and in the end you gained her love—you went so far, even, as to have the wedding day set, or at least become formally engaged to her. And all the while you had a wife living in the same city!"

"Wait a bit, my dear girl," with a short, ugly laugh. "You are taking too much for granted, perhaps. You say you are married. May I ask the name of your husband?"

She stared into his pale, hard-set countenance for a moment in silence, amazed at his hardness in thus casting doubt on her words, which no man in all the world better knew to be simple truth itself. Unflinchingly he encountered her steady gaze, and seeing that he really awaited her answer, she added:

"Dare you deny that I am your wife, Marcus Dineon?"

"Deny that you are Mrs. Marcus Dineon? My dear girl, I'd take a solemn oath to that effect on a stack of Bibles tall enough to serve one as a ladder to visited the moon up yonder!"

"Yet you cruelly deceived her into the belief that you were single, and as such you won her love. You deserted me for nearly two months, and it was only when that cruel letter came that I even suspected your treachery—that I for the first time doubted the perfect truth of your statement that important business called you from the city! Even then I would not believe the vile charge brought against you, until it was proven beyond all possibility of mistake. I went to the house mentioned in the letter. I found them awaiting your coming to refute those heavy charges and clear your fair fame. I found a lovely woman who stood up proudly in your defense whenever the slightest slur was cast at your honor, and I loved her for it, even when she called me a liar as I showed the paper that proved my righteous claim upon you, as a wife!"

"And between you all, you made a very neat little hot bath for the devoted Marcus Dineon, should he ever turn up again!" laughed Gillespie, his eyes gleaming with exultation. "How I wish I could have been there to see!"

"Why were you not?" Rose suddenly demanded. "You should have been! You were cruel to me, cruel to her, unjust to all!"

"And so you fancied you would meet me dangling in the train of the lovely Drusilla, eh?"

"It was my only hope when the long days went by and you neither came nor wrote," was the quiet, sad reply. "I knew then that you had deserted me—that your love for me had died away before your mad passion for Miss Ward. I tried to die, but they would not permit me to do so. They forced me to eat and drink, and with returning strength came the wish to die, if die I must, at your feet, pleading for the love which was my only heaven—the love which no witting action of mine has ever forfeited!"

"Very pretty—but nonsensical, my dear. Excuse me; I do not wish to interrupt your recital. Pray continue."

The poor woman shrunk away a little, and the quivering in her voice told how keenly she felt the sting of those sneering tones and mocking words.

"I sold the jewels you gave me, Marcus, and with them paid my passage to St. Louis. I kept close to my state-room, pretending illness—little pretense was needed, heaven knows!—with a sudden outburst of bitterness. "Only the stewardess has seen my face since I came aboard, until now. I came on deck for a breath of fresh air, and noticing a couple near, I sat down behind that boat, to keep from being noticed. Heaven knows I never once dreamed of the discovery I was about to make! And when I recognized your voice, my brain whirled and I believe I actually lost my senses for a few minutes. Then—you know how it turned out."

"You say you heard me pleading with a certain lady for her love?" slowly demanded the man.

"I heard you ask Drusilla Ward to become your wife!" was the steady response. "And you with a living wife! You, my husband! Oh, Marcus! are you all bad—all evil?"

With a short, cold laugh, her companion made reply:

"I am afraid you forget yourself, madam. Married you may be, for aught I can say to the contrary, but most assuredly you are no wife of mine—highly honored as I ought to be at your selection!"

With a little incredulous cry Rose started back, staring up into that cold and cruel face, scarce able to credit the evidence of her own senses.

"Not your wife? Marcus, what do you mean?" she gasped.

"I mean that this little farce is played out, Rose Enright," was the stern, relentless reply, as his arm tightened about her round waist and his glowing eyes stared keenly into hers. "I mean that if you ever had any legal claim on me, as Marcus Dineon, it no longer exists!"

Instinctively the stupefied woman put one hand to her bosom, and Gillespie showed his teeth in a grim smile as he divined that she was seeking her marriage certificate.

"Here, as we stand alone and without witnesses, I am willing to admit that I married you—that we were united as firmly as the laws of man could bind us together."

"Then why deny me? Why say that I am not your wife?"

"Simply because I have grown tired of you, and have met another whom I love a thousand-fold more than I ever did you, even in the first flush of our honeymoon!" was the brutal response. "You may kick and squirm, but it is the truth, and the sooner you come to a proper understanding of the case the better it will be for all parties concerned."

"We were married, but who is there to prove it? True, you have a marriage certificate. The clergyman still lives, but he is blind and cannot conscientiously swear to me as the man he joined to you. The only other witness is dead."

The paper itself will prove nothing if I deny that it is genuine. I never expect to return to Orleans to live. I will change my name and deny that I ever saw or knew you. What can you do in a case of that sort?"

His reasoning was lame, his conclusions faulty, but he did not believe Rose was in a condition to detect either one or the other just then, and he was right. She was stunned, her heart was crushed within her bosom at this sudden revelation of the utter baseness of the one man in all the world whom she had loved and trusted. It seemed like some frightful nightmare, and she was vaguely conscious of trying to rouse herself from the soul-sickening dream.

Keen, sharp-witted man of the world though he was, Gideon Gillespie misinterpreted the cause of her silence, and acting on his baseless fancy, he spoke even more freely:

"You see, Rose, the trump cards all lie in my hand, and if I choose to play them for all they are worth, you can't secure a single trick. I can ruin you wherever you go; I can bring you down to starvation, or even worse, if you refuse to listen to reason. But if you act sensibly and yield to the inevitable, you shall never have cause to regret this little confidential interview. Will you, girl?"

"Will I what?" faltered Rose, pressing one hand to her forehead like one whose brain is in a confused whirl. "I do not comprehend. Tell me plainly what it is you expect of me."

"You are strangely obtuse, this evening," he said, with a short, ugly laugh. "See if you can understand this: I am not Marcus Dineon. I married you under his name, simply because I knew he was my most dangerous rival, and I needed a deadly weapon to have ready for use in case the worst should come. I never loved you. I looked on you simply as a tool, by using which at the proper time, I might win the woman I did love. I have so used you, and now that I have no further use for you, I cast you aside as I would a worn out glove!"

"Still, I will not say that I hate you, only as a wife. If you resign that empty claim—which you can never assert to my injury, since no living soul ever believed me Marcus Dineon save yourself—and act sensibly, I will still support you, will still spend an occasional spare hour in your company when I have nothing better to do; will—"

A sharp blow across the lips cut his vile speech short.

Her face pale as death, but with eyes that flashed with indignation such as only a bitterly insulted woman could experience, Rose Enright stood facing him, her bosom panting her very soul on fire.

"You cowardly cur!" she gasped, her voice low and hoarse with the intensity of her passion. "At last you have dropped your mask and suffered me to see you in your true colors!"

"Precisely what I intended, my dear," was his careless retort, though his strong arm resisted all her efforts to free her waist, and his evil eyes shot a swift glance around them. "Soft words would not shake you, and so I had to hit right from the shoulder. I make you a fair offer: what do you say?"

"This!" was the intensely earnest answer. "I will foil your vile schemes, though it cost me my life! You may kill me, but before I die, I will see Drusilla Ward and save her from your devilish arts! I will proclaim you for what you are—a perjured husband, a—"

"Not yet, my lady!" the villain grated, savagely, through his clinched teeth as his arm tightened around her waist with paralyzing force, while his tight-clinched fist rose and then descended upon her exposed temple with a sickening thud!

Instantly her struggles ceased, and she hung on his arm a dead weight. He cast a swift glance around him, and seeing nothing to excite his suspicion, he lifted her clear of the deck, held her for an instant over the guard, then cast her headlong down into the hurrying waters below!

CHAPTER XV.

MOKE IS "ALL MIXED UP!"

Of all those who witnessed the sudden recovery and consequent actions of Purty Paddy, probably Moke Horner, the Boss Roustabout, was the most thoroughly astonished. He did not believe the man lived who could "come to time" after that terrible throw, and feeling sure the struggle was at an end, so far as the Irishman was concerned, he had generously refrained from adding the weight of his own body to the fall, turning away to where Yellow Jack Tandy stood holding his clothes.

"Look out! de little white debble come ag'in!" warningly cried his excited second, and Moke wheeled with his hands on guard as Purty Paddy scrambled to his feet in readiness to renew the fight for supremacy.

Then came that clear, cutting voice from the guards above, and like one haunted by an evil conscience, Purty Paddy glared angrily in that direction—to behold the face of a man whom he could have taken his oath was dead!

Moke Horner also glanced upward, and he, too, caught a brief glimpse of the apparition—

for indeed it seemed something more than natural. It was the face of Marcus Dineon, thin and wan, seemingly floating without body against the dark background of the huge smoke-stack. Then—a pale-green hue suddenly flashed over the face, rendering it doubly terrifying to the conscience-stricken murderer below!

The bruised and bloodied countenance of the Boss Roustabout was broadening in a homely grin, when he was amazed by the desperate action of Purty Paddy. He believed that the man had forgotten where he was, in the terror inspired by that ghastly face, and turning to flee from what he must have believed a supernatural avenger, had plunged blindly into the mad Mississippi. He saw him take the plunge so awkwardly that in an instant all remembrance of their quarrel and desperate struggle, together with his almost certain belief that Purty Paddy was one of the footpads who struck down Marcus Dineon that night in the streets of New Orleans, vanished from his mind, and he only saw a fellow-being in danger of death.

"Man ovahbo'd!" he cried, leaping to the spot where Purty Paddy had stumbled over the edge, joining his hands together above his head, then cleaving the dark tide with scarcely an audible sound.

Instantly the whole steamer was in a wild uproar. The captain and the mate shouted out their orders with a vigor that almost split their well-seasoned throats. The roustabouts rushed here and there, tumbling over each other in their mad excitement. The pilots rung their bells and the engineers quickly checked the way of the Water Witch. For once the sports forgot their betting, and crowded to the hurricane deck and along the guards, peering eagerly for a glimpse of the two men who had so suddenly changed their scene of action.

And on the deck above, was a man whom that wild yell of the Boss Roustabout had almost entirely unnerved, for he believed that it pointed at him—since the cry arose just as the lifeless body of poor Rose Enright clove the water at the stern of the boat.

With hand on a revolver, he crouched down in the shadow of the overturned yawl, trembling like a leaf, but with his eyes glowing redly and his white teeth clinched in savage desperation as he counted the lives he would demand for his own when the avengers of blood should pounce upon him!

Swiftly and apparently without forethought as Moke Horner had acted, yet there was method in his madness. This was not the first time he had swum in the Mississippi when it was at the flood, and when he struck the water, he dove deep, turning and swimming desperately with the current. His main endeavor was to sink so far down as to be beyond reach of those thundering paddle-wheels, one touch from which would crush him to a helpless mass of humanity.

He could hear them roaring and crashing through the water above his head as he darted along like a fish, and even then he noticed the abrupt change in their speed, and knew that he would be assisted to the full powers of the boat's crew.

Guided by the sounds of the paddle-wheels, Moke soon altered the position of his body, and turning his head upward, shot rapidly toward the surface, only to strike against an object which instinct told him was what he sought. Before it could elude him in the swirling, contrary currents created by the passage of the boat—for below the surface and for some little distance behind a boat, there exists a peculiar sort of undertow, turning, rolling over and over, whirling here and there in the most bewildering angles, so that two objects which are side by side one instant, may the next be tossed yards and rods apart—Moke Horner grasped the body in his strong right hand, then struck out vigorously for the surface.

With a panting gasp he broke through the foam-crested waves left by the wheels of the Water Witch, and his first thought was to look around for the boat. A little grunt of wonder broke from his lips as he beheld it nearly a hundred yards above him, and far to one side.

"De good Lawd! what a dove dat was!" he spluttered as a white-cap struck him in the face and seemingly poured about a quart of the muddy liquid down his capacious throat. "Make a catfish sick des to look—say, Irish—de bressed Lawd!"

With the skill and adroitness of one who fully comprehended the peril of having a drowning man grapple with him, Moke Horner had kept the object he grasped below the surface, at arm's length until now. In turning to look after the Water Witch, he brought the person he had rescued from the depths between him and the red glare of the still blazing fire-crates, to discover that a wonderful transformation had taken place—instead of Purty Paddy, he grasped the form of a woman!

In his utter amazement, Moke dropped his treasure trove even more quickly than he had clutched it, making a swift dart backward through the water, his eyes almost protruding from their sockets. Surely this was witchcraft!

"Mercy—spare me!"

Barely articulate were the words as the poor creature feebly struggled in the water, her head going out of sight as she uplifted her hands.

Superstitious though he was, this was too much for the honest negro, and with a swift dart he once more grasped the sinking woman and lifted her head clear of the surface.

He saw that she had swooned or was dead, and for a moment the cold chill which shot down through his right arm, almost disabled him, and mechanically he glared around in quest of something which would aid him in supporting his burden.

A little above and to the rear of his present position, he saw a large log floating, and with a few strong strokes he gained it. With his left arm thrown over the log, holding the fainting woman on his other, Moke cast a rapid glance around them, taking in the situation at a glance.

He could see that the Water Witch had almost lost her way, keeping her paddle-wheels revolving with just sufficient rapidity to hold her own against the swift current. He could see that already the men, working under the cool guidance of the mate, had climbed into the yawl which swung behind the steamer and were just lowering it into the water. He could note their actions quite distinctly by the lighted lantern which the mate held to direct them.

He could see that the swirling currents had swept him far in toward the present bank, but which would be some little distance inland at a moderate stage of the water. He already knew that the Water Witch was keeping near the regular channel, in order to avoid danger from sunken snags or tree-stumps now hidden by the overflow.

His glance toward the bank showed him the trees and bushes which seemed to be whirling, dancing past him up-stream, only a few yards away, and he knew that it would be no very serious task to gain the shore, even while incumbered by the helpless creature who had so strangely been flung into his arms.

The loud voice of the mate now rung out, calling both his name and that of the missing Irishman, and Moke Horner was just on the point of answering, when a choking shout came:

"Howly vargin! I'm 'most gan! Save me, mate, dear!—quick, or the divil has Purty Paddy—*ugh!*"

There was no mistaking the bitter extremity of the man who uttered that cry. Not the words alone, but every note of the strained voice told how nearly exhausted he was.

An encouraging cheer came from the boat, and Moke closed his lips with a resolute magnanimity. An annoying enemy the Irishman had proven himself; a vile criminal, if not an actual murderer; but the gallant negro knew that he must sink forever should the boat first attempt to rescue him from the floating log. He could tell from the sound that Purty Paddy was far out near the middle of the river, having doubtless been caught up by a side current similar to that which, though in an opposite direction, had whirled the negro in toward shore.

Moke saw the boat darting with all the speed of oars and the current toward the spot from whence arose that despairing cry, the mate standing up in the bows, holding the bright lantern high over his head as he keenly swept the troubled surface with his eyes. He saw all this, but then he felt the form hanging over his shoulder move, and caught the sounds:

"Do not—murder! Oh, Marcus—my husband!"

"Fank de good Lawd you wokted up, missy!" he exclaimed, making his voice as soft and genial as he might without letting the roar of the waters drown it entirely. "Cheer up, an' don' gib way no mo', honey! Dar's de boat, an' we got a pow'ful good ole log to hung on to while waitin' fo' dem. Cheer up, missy, an' we all yight mighty soon—we des is!"

The poor woman stared wildly into his shining black face as the reflection of the bright moon made it dimly visible. She seemed dazed and unable to fully comprehend her present situation. She seemed to think herself still on the deck of the Water Witch, pleading with, even as she shrunk from, her cruel and merciless husband.

"Don't—don't strike me, Marcus! I will go—I will leave you to win her—only—*don't murder me!*"

Dumfounded, Moke Horner stared at the poor creature, at a loss to comprehend her meaning. Murder? And Marcus? Not his Marcus, surely!

A sobbing cry, and the half-crazed woman shrunk away, her frame trembling violently as though she felt that merciless hand smiting her down—down to death! And with that cry she flung up her arms and would have slipped from the grasp of the thoroughly bewildered negro had he not made a vigorous effort to save her.

As it was, the log rolled over under the impetus, and Moke felt himself carried under the surface. He grasped the woman firmly with one arm, then struck out desperately. Despite the struggling of the choking creature, he gained the surface once more, casting a swift glance

around in search of the log which had already served him such a good turn.

It was far away, caught in a current that was steadily carrying it further out toward the middle of the river, and at once Moke Horner turned his whole attention to gaining the shore, fortunately now so near at hand.

Yet it proved to be no easy task even for one of his prodigious strength and remarkable skill as a swimmer. The currents were so baffling, whirling in conflicting zigzags, now rushing at the crumbling bank as though about to overwhelm it at a single sweep, then whirling away, forming deep "sucks" and rounded "boils."

Twice the negro reached out to grasp a protruding root, only to be whirled away beyond reach; but on the third attempt he succeeded. Making sure of his grasp, he balanced the form of the woman on his right hand, then cast her clear of the water and over the low bank.

The desperate exertion thus put forth, broke away the root, but now that he was unincumbered, it was a comparatively easy matter for the Boss Roustabout to gain the shore. And a minute later he was bending anxiously over the motionless form of Rose Enright, or, as she believed herself, Rose Dineon.

He saw that she was alive, that her eyes were open, staring up into his face with a dazed and bewildered look, and with a glad chuckle, he spoke:

"Didn't I tola ye so, missy? Yar we is, safe an' soun' on dry lan'! Ober dar's de boat—I'll call 'um—"

With a desperate effort she rose to a sitting posture and grasped his arm, feebly muttering:

"No—no—do not! He will come! He will be angry that I am yet alive, and he will kill me! Oh, Marcus! my love—my husband! So dear, yet so cruel—so hard and merciless!"

Never was poor mortal more thoroughly bewildered than our sable athlete as he stood there staring at the strangely-rescued woman. If she had not been holding his arm so tightly it may even be that Moke would have taken to his heels in superstitious dread, even though he did carry the all-potent rabbit-foot!

His ludicrous amazement, coupled with the look of doubting fear which blended in his face, seemed to restore the woman to something like her normal condition of mind.

"I am not mad—indeed I am not!" she uttered, striving hard to control her voice. "I am only a poor, miserable woman to whom death would be a merciful boon. Oh, if you had not risked your life to preserve mine! If you had only suffered me to go down to death then, when I felt nothing—when all was a blissful blank! But now—I dare not return to that boat! It would be worse than a thousand deaths to meet him face to face again!"

"De good Lawd!"

It was all poor Moke could find to reply with, when the strange creature whom he rather more than half believed was some supernatural inhabitant of the muddy Mississippi, which had assumed this shape the better to compass his eternal ruin, poured forth that—to him—incomprehensible plaint. Then a loud, glad cheer from far below them, and still further out on the river, told him that the Irishman had been rescued from a watery grave. This gave him sound footing once more, and he turned to the woman, hastily uttering:

"Dar's de boat, an' dey's ketched de udder feller! I des gib a yell, an' dey come ober heah fo' us an' take us back to de ole Water Witch in a hurry—dey des will!"

The woman increased the vigor of her grasp, rising up and staring wildly into his face as she gasped:

"Another, you say? There was another in the water? Then I may have been mistaken—he did not throw me overboard! I staggered and fell, as he uttered those cruel words, and his love revived—he leaped in after me, at the risk of his own life? Say that it was my husband and I will forever bless and pray for you!"

"Deed I say dat, ef you want, missy, an' I tek pow'ful oat' he true, w'edder he lie or not!" declared Moke, now so completely out of his element and so thoroughly bewildered that it would have puzzled him to say whether he was standing on his feet or on his head.

"But you must know—you leaped into the water after me when I fell, did you not?" persisted Rose, equally befogged.

"Dat I would, ef I knowed you was dar, missy," eagerly replied the ebony athlete. "But I didn't. I jumped in to ketch a low-down white-trash Irishman dat tumbled ober, an' when I hit you comin' up, I finked it was him—axin' pardin fo' makin' sech a 'graceful' stake as dem!—but de muddy water so shet my eye dat I couldn't see nuffin', sca'cely."

Rose shrunk back, covering her eyes for a moment. Then, again grasping his arm and pointing out to where the red light of the lantern was still visible as the mate in the yawl ordered his men to row rapidly to and fro while he called aloud to the missing negro:

"Who was it they picked up out of the water, then?"

"Des dat Irishman, I reckon, missy."

"You are sure?" faintly hoping even against all hope.

"Dat easy fin' out," was the prompt reply. "I call dem in so you kin see fo' you' own self, missy!"

"No!" as she grasped his arm with desperate energy. "Not for the world! My eyes are open now! I can see him in all his hideous deformity! I would rather die a thousand deaths than return to that boat to meet him again! You must not bail the yawl—or if you do, you must not mention my name! Let me go and hide myself in the wilderness, and then, when I am gone, you can call them here. But promise me, by your hopes of a blessed hereafter! that you will never mention my name—never speak of having saved me from the watery death to which his cruel arms hurled me!"

"But, missy, you die in here!" expostulated the bewildered negro. "De snakes bite you—de painters tar you to lilly bits—you nebber lib to see de day come ef I leabe you here—'deed an' double 'deed I's tellin' you true, missy!"

A hard, bitter laugh from her ashen lips startled him.

"I would welcome death, after all I have endured! And yet—if I could only get aboard the steamer for a few minutes, without his knowledge! If I could only see and put her on her guard more completely against him! But that would be impossible! He would be sure to see and recognize me, and then—God forgive me if I wrong him! I believe he would again attempt to murder me! Oh, Marcus!"

Mokey Horner stood silently by, closely watching, closely listening, striving hard to see a ray of light through the dark mystery. He started at the repetition of that name, and the slight ejaculation which escaped his lips proved sufficient to bring the woman out of her abstracted fit.

"You know him—my husband?" she abruptly demanded.

"Ef you say so, missy," meekly bowed the black giant, half-confirmed in his belief that at the very least this strange being was a crazy woman.

"If I could only trust you!" and there was a piteous earnestness in the gaze which she bent upon him that made the blood in his veins tingle and flow more rapidly.

He took the precious rabbit-foot from his pantaloon pocket, pressing it to his lips with the reverence of a religious devotee, then uttered with a quiet dignity that powerfully impressed the friendless creature beside him:

"Missy, I only po' ign'ant niggah, who hab to wuk fo' he libbin' like a slave, dough, fank de good Lawd! I's bin a free man fo' dese ten y'ars gone by! I's only a common niggah, but fo' all dat I kerry heart dat is white as any man. You's a proud lady, but you's in trouble, an' dat gibs me de heart to say dat I'll help you all I kin. See! I tek oat' on de rabbit-foot to do des what you say, an' no mo' dan dat!"

He touched his lips to the charm, then drew it in the shape of a cross over his heart. And as he folded his arms and stood quietly before her, Rose Enright knew that she could place implicit reliance on him through thick and thin.

"I will trust you!" she impulsively cried. "To prove how wholly—my husband—Marcus Dineon, tried to murder me by casting me into the river from the stern of the Water Witch!"

"DE—GOOD—LAWD!" was all Mokey could ejaculate.

CHAPTER XVI.

MOKEY EXERCISES BOTH WIT AND MUSCLE.

THIS was the capsheaf, and literally feeling that he was without ground to stand on, Mokey Horner staggered back a pace and squatted down, resting his chin on his joined palms as he gazed fixedly, curiously into the dimly-visible face of the woman whom he had been the means of rescuing from a watery grave. It was all a bewildering puzzle, and the more he tried to solve it, the more intricate grew the tangled knot.

Rose Enright failed to comprehend the full meaning of his action. She thought it only another whimsical method of expressing his humble submission to her will, and she rapidly culminated the complicated events which finally outlined in that dastardly attempt at murder by her husband. She feared to dwell at length on any particular point, for she could see the yawl rapidly rowing around in quest of the missing negro, the mate now and again lifting his voice in a prolonged halloo, then bending his ear as the oarsmen ceased rowing for the moment, to hearken for an answer. The current was steadily carrying the boat down-stream, and it would long ago have become invisible, only for the light of the lantern which Mate Devlin carried on high. Yet she trembled with dread lest they should discover the present whereabouts of the negro and hastening thither, bear him off, with herself, to the steamer where her cruel husband would surely complete his dastardly work, before she could warn Drusilla Ward of her great peril.

The Boss Roustabout listened to her without once breaking the silence which had fallen over him when he heard his white friend, Marcus Dineon, accused of foul murder. For a time

his eyes were steadily fixed upon hers, but then, as he detected traces of uneasiness and embarrassment in her face and voice, he slightly altered his position and gazed out on the swiftly-flowing river.

He could see the yawl, still engaged in hunting for him, and a little smile of triumph faintly curled his lip at this evidence of the high estimation in which he was held by the officers of the Water Witch. Not for every humble roustabout would they be taking so much trouble and spending so much valuable time.

The smile faded away and gave place to a look of surprise as Mokey glanced up-stream, where he expected to behold the Water Witch just holding her own against the swift current, waiting for the return of her boat. Instead, she was just vanishing from view around the point, more than a mile up stream! Apparently she had abandoned, not only the two roustabouts, but the mate and his boat's crew as well!

"De good Lawd!" he muttered, vigorously scratching his head as though in hopes of thereby brightening his befogged wits. "Dar's a nudder knock-em-stiff, an' double-come-twist-'em-a-l-up! Nebber see sech a 'funnelly muxt-up a'fa'r as dis, in all my 'sperience afo'—nebber! 'Clar' to Moses in de bullrushes! I mighty good min' fo' hunt out a woodchuck hole an' des crawl in dar an' lay low ontel de a'r cl'ars up enuff so a body kin tole w'edder he his own self or somebody else—I des is!"

Though unconscious of the fact, Mokey had given audible vent to his thoughts, and now was startled again by the piteous, appealing tones of Rose Enright:

"You will not desert me now? You will aid me as you promised? I am not rich, but I can pay you for your trouble."

"'Deed, missy, you bin pay Mokey a'ready, when you say he you' frien' an' you ax um to help you," quickly replied the Boss Roustabout, all of his wondering doubts taking flight before the sight of her distress. "He only common niggah, but mebbe he done help you bettah dan most white mans des now."

"If you only could! If you could only succeed in helping me on board that steamer again without letting him suspect my return alive! But I fear that is impossible!"

Mokey caressed the tip of his bruised nose thoughtfully, as he manfully tackled this enigma. Rose watched him for a brief space, then her burning impatience broke the silence:

"Could we not bribe those men in the boat? Would they not agree to keep our secret, and generously aid me in preserving a pure and noble-hearted woman from the cunning snare of an unscrupulous man? If I could only get back without his seeing me!"

"He sartin suah see, if go in de yawl. De crowd all he watchin' fo' see wedder dey saba de fool' Irisher an' de bigger fool niggah dat jumped ober a'ter him, an' you be found out mighty soon, dough dey all try fo' hide you. An' den de ole Water Witch done gone—de good Lawd! what a 'funnelly fool you be, ole niggah! I punch you' fool' head fo' two cent!" he ejaculated, with a sniff of supreme self-disgust.

Rose Enright stared at him as though it was her turn to entertain doubts or suspicions of insanity; and Mokey, noting this, put the curb on with promptitude.

"I say I ole fool, missy, 'ca'se I fo'git dat de boat gwine stop fo' wood des' a little way 'bove here. I heah de mate say so fo' we hab dat row. I finked it mighty curious de ole boat go on an' leabe de mate behin', but dat's it. She go on to wood-landin', an' dar she tie up an' wait fo' mate to row back. It tek long pull, but it safer dan fo' de ole Water Witch to go backin' an' foolin' 'roun' here whar de trees an' snags come a-boomin' all de time, an' mebbe mash a wheel all to pieces. Dat's it, an' ef missy say so, we git dar 'fore de yawl—git abo'd wivout anybody finkin' who you is!"

"Oh, if you could only manage it!"

"Sartin suah we kin ef missy des say de wud!" grinned the Boss Roustabout, nodding his head so violently that it seemed as though it must fly off his shoulders. "Mokey know de lay of de groun' des like he know he own face when it got on he Krismiss rig! He kin shut he eye an' lay a straight co'se fo' dot wood-landin' in de brackest night ebber was, an' nebber trip nor 'tumble once while he done it!"

"If we could," repeated Rose Enright, her eyes glowing with a feverish light. "If we only could—but it seems impossible! It is so dark and dismal under these trees, and there is no road—you would lose your way in the dark!"

Mokey uttered a little chuckle.

"De ribber won't 'low git los', missy. Keep by dat, an' we boun' to go yight. We ketch ole Water Witch 'fore day, suah!"

"It will not wait so long—it will think you lost, and leave on its journey before we can reach the landing."

Anxious as she was to see Drusilla Ward in time to put her thoroughly on her guard against the man who had wedded only to cruelly disown her, now that there seemed a faint hope of doing so without his knowledge, Rose dreaded

to make the attempt. Bitterly as he had wronged her, she still loved the villain whom she only knew as Marcus Dineon. She was almost certain that he had attempted to murder her, though that dastardly blow had fallen so swiftly that she had not had time to fairly realize his purpose; she knew in her heart that he would not shrink from repeating that attempt on her life, even while she kept repeating to herself that it was all false—all a wild fancy of her disturbed brain. Yet she shrunk from putting it to the test.

Mokey was not capable of understanding these sudden and subtle changes, and so he did his best to convince her that she was borrowing unnecessary trouble.

"You see, missy, dough dis cullud pusson is a mighty common ole niggah to sech quality as you-dem, he some-fin' mo' dan dat on bo'd de ole Water Witch. He kerry de rabbit-foot, an' he pow'ful hoodo'coon. Dem ign'ant niggah han's dey lay yight down undah Mokey's tum. Ef anything happen to him, dey know bad-luck come to de boat, an' dey yun off to de swamp, jump in de ribber—do anything des so dey git away from dat ole Water Witch 'fore dey coteb in de 'farnal smash. No use tell 'um dey foolish. Dey know dat trouble boun' to come when anything happen crooked to de hoodoo-man. An' de cap'n he know des what dey fink, too!"

"Fo' dat reason de mate keep huntin' for Mokey out dar in de ribber so long. Only fo' dat rabbit-foot, he tarn back long 'go; dey don' waste time ober common rouser. Fo' dat same reason the cap'n he keep de Water Witch at de wood-landin' tell it sartin suah Mokey lost fo' good. An' so you see, missy, we hab plenty time to ketch de boat ef we mek haste an' don' go to sleep on de yoad."

Mokey saw that his rapid speech had not quite convinced her, but he believed that the plan he proposed was the best for all concerned, and knowing that there was no time to be lost if it was to be carried into successful execution, he turned toward the river, far adown which he could distinguish the lantern in the hands of Mate Devlin, and hollowing his palms, he emitted a long, shrill screech that would not have disgraced a steam-whistle.

Rose Enright uttered a startled cry and caught him by the arm, fear rendering her speech almost inarticulate:

"No, no! I dare not return with them in the boat! He would see me—he would kill me!"

"Den dar's des one udder way, missy," quickly returned the Boss Roustabout. "We got to tote 'long de bank on foot. We kin beat dem in de yawl, anyway."

As he spoke, Mokey kept his gaze fastened on the distant boat, and with an inward chuckle he saw by the sudden flashing of the lantern and the stopping of the oars, that his hail had been heard. Straining his mighty lungs to the utmost, putting a brief pause between the words, emphasizing each syllable to the best of his ability, he shouted:

"Hellow de boat! Heah I is! You too fur down!"

With bending head and hollowed palm back of his ear, the Boss Roustabout listened, a broad grin overspreading his face as a faint shout came back to him, and the yawl shot suddenly in toward the bank, as though to get out of the swiftest current as quickly as possible.

Then he turned to Rose Enright, saying:

"Now, missy, it fo' you to choose. Dar de boat. Dey soon come up heah, an' you kin go in it an' yide easy to de ole Water Witch. Des let Mokey say de word, an' dar aiu't a rouser on bo'd but what fight fo' you like wife cat! Dey ain't no one man kin hu't you, ef you want to truss we-dem."

"I dare not!" with a shudder, hiding her eyes. "Take me the other way—get me aboard without the possibility of his discovering my return until after I have had time to do my duty, and I will forever bless ye! If you cannot—then leave me here to die, and save yourself."

"Den heah we go, missy! Tek de ole man's han', mis-y, fo' help you git along. It honest, ef it am brack an' hard."

Her own will so sorely shaken, her brain in a dizzy whirl and all her reasoning faculties benumbed, Rose obeyed, yielding to his guidance like some little child.

Mokey started up-stream, walking as rapidly as the tangled way and the powers of the trembling woman whom he so strangely had flung upon his care, would permit. He soon found that the task promised to be an almost herculean one. He feared to keep too close along the bank of the river, for the sandy soil was steadily being eaten away by the ceaseless waves and swirls of the flood, and he dreaded being caught by one of those miniature landslides. Further back in the forest, the interlaced tree-tops shut out every glimmer of light from the moon and stars, rendering it impossible to see a rod in front of them. The ground was rapidly soaking full of water, and Mokey knew that it would not be long before the flood and the backwater which he felt confident lay not far away inland, would join their forces. It was possible that they might find themselves cut off from the wood landing by the rising water,

and for that reason among others, he kept as close to the edge of the river as he dared. If worst came to worst, they could enter the yawl.

For fully a mile they made the best of their way up the river, and then the woman gave out, sinking in her tracks from sheer fatigue.

"Leave me—I can go no further!" she gasped, painfully.

Moke did not immediately reply. He was peering keenly down the stream, and as the sounds of their footsteps died away, he caught the sound of a lusty shout, and knew that the men in the yawl had paused to gain a more definite idea of his whereabouts.

"Hellow!" he shouted, making a funnel of his hands and giving a roar that caused the woods to echo again. "Dis way—up de ribber! I all yight! I ride de rabbit-foot up to de Water Witch—tell um you on de yoad a-comin'!"

Turning to Rose Enright, his voice soft and soothing:

"We got plenty time, missy. Dat boat fin' mighty hard pull up de ribber when it on de boom like now. Dar won't be too much 'tarch in dey backs when dey git to de eend—no indeedy! Dey des as fur below us as dey was when we 'tarted, an' while dey pullin' up dis way, you tek good yest; den we tote 'long faster den dey kin pull, easy!"

"I am afraid not, my good friend," she murmured, her voice faint and despairing. "I have been ill—I am not strong—and I have nothing to live for now!"

"Now don't, missy—don't!" gently expostulated the honest negro. "You too young to fink ob dyin'—heap too young! De good Lawd he ain't done call you yit, an' you don't look so wicked es to fly yight in de face ob He bressed will. An' den fink ob dat young lady you 'peak ob—fink ob your husband' what you talk 'bout back dar—"

"It is because I cannot help thinking of him that I am so willing to despair and die!" impulsively cried the wretched creature, so beautiful, so young, yet so unutterably miserable and heart-broken.

"Mebbe you dream it all," gently suggested the Boss Roustabout. "Mebbe you walk in you' sleep an' jump in de water. Dat mus' be it! I nebber gwine fink dat Marse Marcus so mighty wicked es to hu't sech a nice lady!"

Rose leaned forward with an eager light in her eyes, and her voice was much stronger as she cried:

"You know him? You know Marcus Dingen?"

"Deed I does, missy! What puzzle me, is how you know him?"

"He is my husband. He loved another lady, and the affection which he once vowed to me, has turned to bitterest hate! He wanted to get me out of his way in order to marry her, for she is as rich as she is lovely. I saw them talking together on the hurricane-deck—I heard him pleading for her love—and when she left him, I rushed to his arms, hoping in my mad folly that the sight of my face—the knowledge of my overwhelming love—would drive all evil fancies out of his mind and turn him once more to me!"

"You dead suah it wa'n't no dream?" persisted Moke.

"A dream?" with a hard, hysterical laugh. "If I could only think so! I try, but it all comes back to me so plainly—I can hear each cruel word and bitter taunt ringing in my ears as though they were but now uttered! And here, on my temple, you can see the mark of his heavy hand! Ay! he struck me senseless, as though I were a mad-dog instead of his true and loving wife, then hurled me into the water!"

"Whar Moke foun' you," nodded the roustabout.

"Would that you had left me there!" sobbed the woman, her unnatural energy dying out as rapidly as it had risen, her head bowing upon the clasped hands that rested upon her lap.

"Missy," said Moke, speaking earnestly; "you mek mistake somewhar, dat suah an' sartin! Eider you dream all dis, or else you' Marse Dingen ain't my Marse Marcus!"

Lifting her head, Rose stared wonderingly at him.

"You was des sinkin' de fust time when I hit you undah de water, missy, an' dat show plain enuff dat I in de big drink nigh de same time you git dar. Now see dis, an' mark it well: when I jump in de ribber, my Marse Marcus Dingen was in front de boat, leanin' ober de cabin-deck gyards! I tek oat' to dat, missy, on rabbit-foot or on de Bible!"

For a brief space there was silence, then with a sigh:

"You may be right. I remember now that he—my husband—swore that I alone knew him as Marcus Dingen; that he had assumed the name of a hated rival—Merciful Father! I can see it all now!" she gasped, her pale face filling with horror as the truth flashed upon her in all its enormity. "He is even more evil than I believed in my wildest fancy!"

"An' so does I see!" exclaimed Moke, the bewildering fog clearing away as though by

magic. "I knows now why Marse Marcus git bounced! It was you dat went to de young leddy an' show de paper dat made her fink Marse Marcus you' husband!"

"Yes—I visited Miss Drusilla Ward—"

"You tell me dat as we go 'long," hastily interposed Moke, as he saw how rapidly the yawl was approaching their present position. "De boat git in ahead ob us, ef we don't min', an' den mebbe de Water Witch pull out fo' we ketch up."

Without giving her a chance to expostulate, Moke stooped and lifted Rose in his muscular arms, holding her as carefully and comfortably as he might an infant of his own, striding swiftly up the river-bank.

"Now, missy, you tell all how it come 'bout, an' mebbe we 'trike bottom yit," he coaxingly uttered as he proceeded.

After a brief hesitation Rose complied, telling her sad story without reserve, while Moke listened without a word of comment. Indeed, the poor fellow had little breath to spare, despite his really remarkable powers. Though by no means a large or heavy woman, it was no contemptible feat to carry her over that tangled trail through the dark, at times wading knee-deep in mud and water. And more than once the ebony athlete was forced to pause for breath.

It was during the first of these that Rose Enright broke off her narrative to entreat of him a sacred pledge:

"Promise me this, and I will bless you! It may be that I will find it impossible to warn the lady of the plot against her. Promise me that you will see her and repeat my story to her. Tell her to beware of him—for he will spare her no more than he has me, when she has served his selfish ends."

And Moke promised, taking the wonderful rabbit-foot from his pocket, kissing it reverently, then making the sign of the cross over his heart. And Rose was satisfied. Let what might befall her—and she felt that she was doomed never to meet the lovely young woman who had unwittingly caused her such bitter grief and unmerited suffering—Drusilla would be saved.

Still on the gallant negro labored, his broad chest heaving, his breath coming in husky gasps. But never once did he think of giving over the task he had set himself. Steadily on through the night, at times stumbling, but never allowing his helpless charge to suffer harm or injury—still on, to utter a hoarse mutter of thanksgiving as the bright glow of the fire-crates on board the Water Witch burst upon his vision through an opening in the woods.

"Dar she am, missy! An' we beat de yawl, des as I tole ye we would! Whoop-ee! who say ole niggah ain't good fo' nuffin'!"

Gently he lowered Rose to the ground, furtively brushing the great drops of sweat from his throbbing temples.

"I thank you—I honor you, my dear friend!" brokenly uttered the agitated woman. "I thank you for saving my life, poor and worthless as it now looks to me. I will bless and pray for you as long as that life endures!"

"Now don't, missy—fo' de good Lawd's sake, don't!" muttered Moke, with a sheepish grin as she pressed his horny hand in both of hers, then bowed her head over it. "It makes ole niggah feel like he jump yight out he skin, or do somefin' he didn't ort—it des do! It wasn't me—ef you mus' fank anyfing, des' gib it to de rabbit-foot! On'y fo' dat bressed hoodoo, we nebber git heah—no we des couldn't!"

Her mind was sufficiently clear to see that her thanks were really painful to the modest negro, and therefore said no more on that point. And as she glanced toward the not far distant boat, she shuddered and grew sick at heart. He was there—the man she loved, yet feared more than death itself! Should he see her! And how could she gain the inside of the boat without his knowledge? It seemed impossible.

"Now that we are here I dare not attempt to go aboard! He would be sure to see me, and I would rather die than meet him face to face, remembering his awful crime!"

"Dar, honey, des you leave it to ole Moke," soothingly uttered the Boss Roustabout, who had busied his brain for the past hour in devising some plan by which this difficulty might be overcome. "Ole niggah ain't much 'count, but he smart 'nough to frow dirt in he eyes, anyway. Des you leabe it to him, an' sorter spunk up you' 'pirits 'g'inst de time comes when you mus' play you' part. Now do, honey! Des try!"

With a violent effort Rose partially conquered her fears, and as they leisurely walked toward the boat, Moke made known the part he wished her to play.

"You see dem big rank o' wood ober dar? Well, you des go an' slip dar in de darkest shadder you kin fin', when we git up cluss enuff. You wait yight dar ontel Moke come to you wid somefin' fo' w'ap you'self up in, head an' years. Ef de crowd so noisy an' keep too cluss to Moke, as mebbe dem will, I sen' a peert yalla boy to you. Don' you git skart ef you see him comin' place ob dis ole 'coon, but des do as

he say an' leave de rest to us. You do dat, missy?"

"If you think best," she faintly replied, though she trembled in every limb with dread at having possibly to run the gantlet of those suspicious eyes.

"It de only way I see," muttered Moke, scratching his head in the vain endeavor to elicit a more promising scheme. "It boun' to wu'k all yight ef you do des so! Dey all tell you fo' woman want to git out ob de obabflow fore it git too late, an' when Moke dar cuttin' up he monkey-shine, dey won't fink twice ob lookin' at you, long's you keep dat boo'ful face all kibbered ober cluss wid branket. Dar—keep in de shade, an' netter fear but what it all go des yight, honey!"

Leaving Rose thus, Moke shouldered a pile of cord-wood and suddenly darted out into the line of slowly toiling negroes, shouting sharply:

"Jim 'long Josey! Wake up, you brack niggahs an' white snails! You gwine fas' as'leep 'ca'se dar no mate heah!"

CHAPTER XVII.

MOKE TRIES TO FIND BOTTOM.

FOR one breathless instant the roustabouts stared at the ebony athlete, whom by far the greater portion firmly believed had gone down to his death in the mad Mississippi. Then there was a wild "scattering" amid wilder yells. The loads of cordwood went flying in every direction as the roustabouts, particularly the negro portion of them, fell away from the—as they supposed—ghost of the Boss Roustabout.

Some fled blindly, tripping over obstacles and falling headlong, to lie kicking wildly as they yelled in terror or spluttered out all sorts of prayers and invocations. Others, too greatly terrified to flee, stood like trembling statues, staring at the wonderfully natural apparition with eyes that seemed about to pop from their sockets, with teeth that chattered and clicked like so many pairs of nimbly manipulated castanets.

And even among the whites, were some who showed almost as great superstition, falling rapidly away from the grinning negro, dropping their burdens or grasping a stout stick with which to defend themselves.

Taken all in all, Moke Horner must have been very hard to suit if this dramatic *entree* did not prove all he could wish.

"Hoo! back dah to wuk, you fool' niggahs!" he cried, in a tone of virtuous indignation. "Dat 'e way you shirk an' play ole sojer when Moke gone, he 'tick yight by de ole Water Witch f'om dis time on! Nebbah tek nudder swim fo' good ob he helf, 'less you sw'ar you 'tick to business bettah dan dis! Jump into line dah, you rousters! Hump you'self, now! Tackle dat woodpile an' chaw it yight up an' nebbah 'top fo' spit out de splintabs till de ole tea-kettle is a-b'ilin' an' cuttin' de muddy water in two slices wid her nose! Buckle down to it, you bressed sinners! Wha' fo' you 'top to tek nap on de gang-plank, you yed-headed Irishers! Imek you fink de ho'n of ole Gabrel done bu'sted wide open yight in de slack ob you' britches ef I ebber sling dis yer gun-boat at you! Mus' I come wake you up? Oh, fo' somefing like a set ob men who got too much life in 'em fo' not let de moss grow a yard long on de bottoms ob dar boofs!"

Moke had skipped swiftly down the gang-plank and dropped his load of wood on the pile before the furnaces. Then, halting in the full glow of the fire-crates, one hand resting on his hips while the other, armed with a huge club, swung vehemently in time with the words that rolled so glibly off his tongue, he audaciously mimicked the mate when at fever heat, copying his tones, actions and favorite expressions with a fidelity that was instantly recognized not only by the roustabouts, who were rapidly recovering from the consternation into which his sudden and wholly unexpected appearance had cast them, but by the passengers above, who had been drawn from watching for the reappearance of the yawl, by the wild uproar among the deck hands, to say nothing of the captain, who was but indifferently filling the place left vacant by his accomplished mate.

"De—good—Lawd!" shouted Yellow Jack Tandy, flinging up his battered old hat and breaking into a clumsy dance for pure joy. "Ef it ain't Moke Horner he own self, den I a bressed angel des come down f'om heaben in a han'-basket—I des is!"

"Moke, you black rascal!" cried Captain Miles, coming down the steps at a rate that was far more dangerous to his neck than it was graceful, "where the deuce did you come from, and how did you get here? Where's the mate?"

The Boss Roustabout touched his forelock and scraped the deck with one foot as he bobbed his head, grinning half-sheepishly, half-waggishly.

"You know I tote de rabbit foot, Marse Cap'n—"

"I know that I'll be eternally blessed if ever I tote you on another boat, so long as I keep my senses!" angrily spluttered the captain. "What in blazes did you jump overboard for? Think we haven't anything to do but tie up to wait for you to go in swimming?"

"Please, Marse Cap'n, I fink dat dirty Irish tek some ob you' money wid him when he tumble obabho'd, an' I go to fetch it back ag'in," rinned Moke, yet with a wary eye out for breakers.

De-pite himself, the captain was forced to laugh at this shrewd bit. He knew that he had been betting freely on the prize-fighter before Moke gave Purty Paddy that terrific fall, and he knew now that Moke had recognized his voice. Naturally good-natured, he could no longer maintain the stand he had assumed. In truth, he secretly felt proud of the ebony athlete, who could fight an ugly adversary one moment, then risk his life to rescue him from death the next.

"Where's the boat? Why didn't you come back in it?"

"It comin', Marse Cap'n—des back a little way, now. I holler tell de mate dat I tell you he comin'." Moke knowed dem lazy niggahs wouldn't wuk wuf a cent, long's bofe Marse Devilin' an' he was out de way, so I des jump on ole rabbit-foot an' come up heah a-skootin' fo' hurry git de wood abo'd."

A shout from the hurricane-deck told that the yawl had turned the point, and instantly nearly every passenger rushed to obtain a view, and Moke was left alone for the moment.

Knowing what tortures Rose Enright must be enduring through this protracted suspense, and fearing lest she should allow terror and dread of her cruel husband to drive her to flight through the night in that tangled wilderness, he grasped Yellow Jack Tandy by the hand and hastily gave him his instructions, wasting not a word, barely bidding him procure as clean a blanket as possible, and take it to the spot where he would find a woman in waiting.

Bewildered, yet retaining sense sufficient to literally follow orders, Tandy obeyed, in the wild confusion that attended the recognition of the Boss Roustabout by his comrades, finding no difficulty in passing through them with the blanket rolled under his arm, without being questioned.

Moke played his part to simple perfection, drawing the excited hands aside while he gave a brief sketch of his exploit, though, of course, saying nothing about his rescue of the woman, and while he was thus keeping them in play, he saw Rose Enright, closely wrapped in the blanket, glide swiftly down the gang-plank and aboard the steamer. So far as he could tell, not a single pair of eyes save those glittering in his own head, had noticed her movements.

"Dar—we talk de yest ober when we git mo' time," he hastily uttered, breaking away as a loud shout answered back the cheer of the passengers on deck. "De mate a-comin', an' you dat don' want to git a red-hot Devilin' a-buzzin' 'roun' you' years in sobah airnest, better be tacklin' dat woodpile mighty peert, now I tole you good!"

And so Mate Devlin found them, led by Moke Horner, whose musical voice poured forth one of those wild, weird songs so dear to the heart of the Mississippi river boatmen, the entire force of deck hands following with the refrain. For one moment the mate glared savagely at the Boss Roustabout, one hand gripping a heavy club, but then the captain touched him on the arm and quietly led him to one side.

What passed between them, none save themselves ever knew, but certain it is that Mate Devlin never assailed Moke Horner with tongue or fist or club on account of that long row. And his voice was strangely subdued as he ordered the massive gang-plank drawn in and the fasts cast off. Then, puffing, quivering from stem to stern with the mighty strokes of her machinery, the good Water Witch once more breasted the swift current of the mad Mississippi.

Moke Horner and Purty Paddy met when the crew gathered in their quarters, but the Irishman only gave the black a sullen scowl as he passed, then drew apart with his mate, Teddy Huke. They whispered together in the dark corner, on what subject is readily enough divined.

Moke found that it was pleasant to be so lionized by his fellows, though even this was not without its drawbacks. His brain was busy with the strange adventure which had befallen him that night, and with the still stranger story which the betrayed wife of the false Marcus Dineon had poured into his marveling ears. He knew that the genuine Marcus Dineon was also on board the Water Witch, and he was plotting and planning for a chance to meet him where they could converse without fear of being overheard by the unknown enemy.

At length Moke broke away from his mates, and passing up to the cabin deck, entered the office and doffing his hat, quietly passed along to the bar and asked for a drink. While the bar-keeper was waiting on him, the Boss Roustabout glanced keenly around the office, and catching sight of a tall, soberly dressed figure, whose eyes were concealed by heavy green goggles, he made a peculiar motion which was answered by an almost imperceptible nod from the clerical looking passenger.

Hastily swallowing his whisky, Moke left the

office, and instead of immediately returning to his proper quarters on the lower deck, he passed around the guards in the direction taken by the man with the goggles.

"Well?" whispered a guarded voice in his ear. "You want to see me for something, old fellow?"

"Deed I des does, Marse Marcus," as guardedly replied the Boss Roustabout. "Ef we kin git whar we talk 'out nobody ketchin' what dis niggah got to say!"

"Come to my state-room, then," replied Marcus Dineon—for he it was, alive and in the flesh.

Gliding silently along the narrow passage, the young lawyer opened the lattice-work door which led into his state-room from the side guards, and Moke followed him. There was no light burning in the confined space, but through the open transom above the door opening into the gentlemen's cabin, light sufficient entered for their purpose.

No sound came through the thin partitions at either side and after listening intently for a few moments, Marcus Dineon correctly concluded the adjoining state-rooms were unoccupied just at that moment.

It will be remembered that when Moke Horner, in company with Yellow Jack Tandy, drove off the assassins in the street of New Orleans, as detailed in the closing lines of a previous chapter, he recognized the prostrate man as a former benefactor, and though he believed at the time that Marcus Dineon was dead, he impulsively slung the supposed corpse over his shoulder and took to flight with his bleeding burden when the alarm given by the police startled him. He feared that if discovered by the corpse, he would be arrested and charged with the murder. This fear, with a certain reluctance to leave the body of his benefactor lying there in his gore, led Moke to carry the young lawyer away. The police were distanced, and when he gained his quarters, Moke found that though severely wounded, Marcus Dineon was still alive. Fearing to trust any white physician with the secrets of that night, Moke called in an old negro doctor, bribing him heavily to keep a close tongue between his teeth. And with Moke as nurse, relieved at intervals by Yellow Tandy, Marcus Dineon slowly recovered.

His wounds were very severe, and for full two weeks he hovered between life and death. For the most part of this time he lay like a corpse, only for his faint breathing; but there were times when the fever of delirium entered him, and wild words fell from his lips. Moke listened closely, and though there was much that he could not understand, he discovered enough to know that his benefactor was sorely troubled on account of one Drusilla. He also spoke of Horace Ward, and during his relief-spells, Moke spent much time in trying to get at the bottom of his patient's trouble.

Thus it was that Marcus Dineon failed to keep his appointment to meet the wretch who, only a tool in a hand that was still more crafty and unscrupulous, charged him with such base treachery. And thus it was that, when his senses returned and his powers of body and mind began to revive, Marcus Dineon learned of the intended removal of the Ward family. He also learned enough to feel sure that Horace Ward would refuse to grant him an interview; and thus it was that he disguised himself and went aboard the Water Witch as a passenger, Moke and Yellow Tandy having shipped as roustabouts.

"If you talk softly, there is no fear of our being overheard, Moke," said the young lawyer, turning to his colored ally. "What is it? What have you discovered? Or is it only to tell me how you managed to escape from drowning?"

The Boss Roustabout looked very solemn, very sober as he suddenly drew the precious rabbit-foot from his pocket and held it up before the startled young man.

"Marse Marcus, you know what dat is?"

"Your rabbit-foot?" queried the young man, half-smiling.

"Yes sar—de rabbit-foot!" and the tones of the negro were almost sepulchral in their earnestness. "It mighty fetch, Marse Marcus. Great hoodoo man made him, an'—"

"I know—you have told me its whole history time and again," a little impatiently. "Surely you didn't come here just to repeat that wonderful tale, did you?"

"You fink it all fool' nonsense, Marse Marcus, I know dat. Sometime you fink dif'unt, mebbe. Sometime you know dat no man kin tek he oat' by de rabbit-foot an' tell a lie dat will stick like de trufe! But let dat go fo' dis time."

"Marse Marcus, you ain't married? You ain't got wife on dis boat? You ain't see her dis night, and den boost her obabho'd?"

Swiftly he asked these questions, keenly watching the face of the astonished young lawyer, who sharply replied:

"Certainly I am not married! What do you mean? Man alive! are you drunk—have you gone crazy?"

"No, Marse Marcus," slowly replied the Boss

Roustabout; "I ain't drunk, 'ca'se I only tek one glass whisky dis night. I don't fink I gone crazy, 'ca'se I tote rabbit-foot all de time. But I des know dis much: my ole brain tangled up an' got mo' curly kinks in it dan ebber you see in a niggah's woolly head! I des don't know what to fink, an' I cain't tetch bottom, nobow!"

"What made you ask me such ridiculous questions, then? Surely you have some sort of reason to give?"

"Marse Marcus, heah's de rabbit-foot. I ax you, hum'ly, an' meannin' no 'fense, will you tek oat' on dat? Will you swar' on de rabbit-foot dat you 'ain't nebbber got no wife in dis worl'? Dat you nebbber bin married to boo'ful white lady? Dat you didn't walk wid her dis 'denticle night up dar on de harrycane-deck while dis niggah was thumpin' dat fool' Irish in de bows? Will you cross you' heart dat you didn't git hoppin' mad at dat lady—you' wife—an' hunch her ober in de drink? I ax you, solemnly an' hum'ly, kin you swar' all dis on de rabbit-foot dat I bo'e up afo' you' two eyes?"

With increasing bewilderment Marcus Dineon stared into the owl-like visage of the negro as he slowly, solemnly put these questions, for a moment inclined to think the negro was playing a stupid joke on him, then half-convinced that his usually well-balanced brain had been turned by his sudden immersion in the mad Mississippi. But both of these ideas were as rapidly dispelled as he looked keenly into those earnest eyes, and he knew that Moke Horner was in sober earnest.

As the shortest method of getting at the real facts, the young lawyer caught the rabbit-foot from the hand of its owner, touched it to his lips and then drew it in the shape of a cross over his left breast.

"I take the oath, Moke," he uttered, with forced solemnity. "I swear that I am not guilty of any of these crimes. If I had a Bible here, I would make still more solemn oath."

"Bress de good Lawd! I knowed it! I knowed Marse Dineon wasn't none ob her Marcus Dineon—'deed an' double-'deed I des did, honey! I des knowed it all de time!" laughed Moke Horner, noiselessly doing the double-shuffle on the carpeted floor of the state-room.

"Then what do you mean by all this infernal nonsense?" a little angrily demanded the lawyer, grasping his arm.

The lips of the Boss Roustabout parted in a wide grin, preparatory to giving a full explanation of his strange conduct, but it was fated that Marcus Dineon was to remain still longer in ignorance of that which so nearly concerned his welfare, for a sharp outcry from the gentlemen's cabin startled them. Almost instantly there followed a shrill cry of mortal agony, and Marcus Dineon flung open the door and darted out of his state-room, followed by the Boss Roustabout.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SHAKY JOE DRAWS TOO OFTEN.

By a certain coincidence, which will seem less remarkable when an explanation is given, in due time, there was still another passenger on board the Water Witch who had played an important part in the Ward-Dineon affair.

Apparently business had greatly improved with Captain Joe Baldwin since the day he sat in the library of Horace Ward, waiting for the coming of Marcus Dineon, for he was now clothed from head to foot in a new "rig," besides wearing one or two more rings on his white, smooth hands than he ordinarily did. Still more convincing proof, he seemed to have plenty of gold in his pockets.

Though he must have known that Horace Ward and his family were aboard, Shaky Joe made no attempt at disguising his face or figure, probably because that, with one afflicted so peculiarly, would be labor spent in vain. He could not disguise that terrible shaking and twitching of his nerves.

After all, why should he try to avoid the notice of the rich merchant? The tale he told still held good, unshaken by the slightest proof. The only man who could possibly refute his elaborate edifice of lies, was dead and food for fishes, long ago, if any dependence was to be placed in the report of Purty Paddy and Teddy Huke.

He had honorably waited until the specified day before cashing the check presented him by the merchant—because he could do no otherwise. It was with this—so he stood prepared to swear in case the necessity ever arose—that he rigged himself out as a gentleman and paid his passage to a more congenial clime.

As has been hinted before, Captain Joseph Baldwin was a gambler by profession, and few faces were better known along the mighty river than his. At that day, few men traveled up or down the Mississippi who objected to card playing for money or sport, and not many who had serious objections to taking a hand in a game with professionals. All men went armed on their travels, and considering the immense amount of card-playing done, there were surprisingly few cases of flagrant cheating on record.

There were then comparatively few of those cunning devices in existence by which profes-

sionals now can thoroughly "skin" a novice or any one who plays a "square game." And all knew that to be detected in the use of such, at that day, was to forfeit life unless able to defend it against odds.

Yielding to his pet vice, Shaky Joe passed nearly all of his waking hours at the card-tables, playing squarely, possibly because as yet he had struck no game where the stakes ran high enough to justify his cheating. He was at the table with one, among others, whom he had marked in his mind as a pigeon especially intended for his private plucking, when the row occurred between Purty Paddy and Moke Horner. Though he saw his snug little game interrupted, just as he felt his intended victim growing ripe for the plucking process, heated by cards and wine, Shaky Joe followed the others to the front guards, ready to take a minnow while waiting for the whale.

He placed his money freely on the ebony ablette, and it was partly this fact—for Shaky Joe was known as a cool and shrewd judge who rarely posted his cash without a fair certitude of raking it in again with additions—more than aught else, that led to installing Moke as first choice. However the battle might have resulted, had it been fought to a finish, the abrupt abandoning of the ring by Purty Paddy was adjudged a defeat, and it was with replenished pockets that Shaky Joe once more sat down to the card-table.

The shivering gambler was in high feather. He had not only made a snug little sum by the affair, but his judgment was confirmed, and when he next met Purty Paddy, he could say: "I told you so!" with a clear conscience.

He had other cause for feeling good humored. Though the stakes had not run high in any of the games that trip, the play had been so constant and fortune had stood beside him so steadily, that he was well satisfied with the wages he had made. There was more hard cash in his pockets than had been his for many a long day!

The young planter on whose wealth he had meditated and figured so long, was slowly growing flushed with the wine he had swallowed, and instead of the brief interlude having cooled his blood any, the direct contrary was the case.

A patron of the ring, he had seen Purty Paddy perform in the "magic circle" more than once with nature's weapons, and feeling that the tall negro would be nothing more than a chopping-block in those tricky and skillful hands, he had wagered freely, giving heavy odds that the white would win. Considerable of his money had passed over to Shaky Joe, and his loss heated the fiery planter more than all the rest which had been won from him.

"I wouldn't give a curse, if the nigger had won, on his merits," he growled, as their seats at the card-table were once more taken. "But to see him come out on top, by the purest fluke! that's what grates me the worst!"

"If Purty Paddy hadn't turned tail, it would have come to the same thing in the end," chuckled Shaky Joe. "I know 'em both, and I tell you, gentlemen, that dinky is a hummer, and no discount on it! I don't believe there's a man in the business to-day that can cut his comb in a twenty-four-foot ring!"

"Talk is cheap, my friend," laughed the half-drunken planter, slapping his pocket with a significant air, "but it takes money to buy good land in these degenerate days. I'm open to match the Irishman against your black pet for any amount up to a plantation and five hundred slaves, the fight to come off at the first landing we make, or at St. Louis, just as you may elect."

Though made in all earnestness and good faith, this proposal to match two men who might even then be lying dead at the mercy of the mad waters, struck those within hearing as more than ordinarily comical, and a roar of laughter greeted it. The fiery blood glared around him with clinched fists, as though about to take vengeance on one and all, but then the ridiculous side of the case presented itself to him as well, and his laughter rung out with the chorus.

"All the same," he added seriously, after the merriment subsided, "I stand to my offer, if they both turn up alive."

"And I'll back the 'coon for all I can raise, if we can gain his consent to go into training," replied Shaky Joe.

"Good enough! In the mean time, the cards are waiting on us," added the planter, taking his seat.

The game was draw-poker, then as now a favorite with men who pride themselves on their skill as short card-players, and who are ready to back their skill with heavy stakes. There were two in the game besides Shaky Joe and the planter.

For a few hands after the game was resumed fortune still smiled on Shaky Joe, but then the tide began to turn against him, despite his utmost skill and care. He touched no liquor while playing, never smoked, keeping his nerves steady and his brain clear. He was playing a square game, for he saw that the two

men, who were now interested, were old hands at the business, who kept a close watch on the actions of all others, as well as of their own affairs, and he disliked to run the risk of "putting up" a hand or any other crooked action.

He used his best judgment in discarding and in betting, playing as he had seldom played before for equal stakes; but do what he might, fortune continued to frown. He could not "hold the cards," somehow, and against a streak of luck of that sort pure skill and judgment are of little avail.

Had he not been for the past week or more trying all he knew to get the level-headed young planter sufficiently "off his base" to render the plucking certain, Shaky Joe would have drawn out of the game then and there; but he doubted whether he would ever be granted a similar opportunity on that trip, and so he played on, expecting the tide to turn again in his favor before many deals.

Thus they were engaged when the loud uproar without announced the return of the Boss Roustabout, followed soon after by the return of Mate Devlin and the nearly-drowned Irishman. The two other players deserted the game to see the end of the curious affair, but Shaky Joe and the planter stuck to the cards, forgetting all else in that absorbing pursuit.

Now that the two cooler heads were out of the game, fortune seemed to favor Shaky Joe a little more, and he won several pots in succession. All the time the planter was showing the effects of his drinking more and more, and as the tide of "luck" once more veered, Shaky Joe resolved to bring sleight of hand to his aid.

"We'll try a fresh deck of cards, for luck!" he cried, turning and giving the order.

At that time—and still, for that matter—every boat that plowed the Mississippi river was amply supplied with cards, and frequently made a neat little thing of it through selling them to passengers, who would call for a fresh pack after almost every reverse meted out to them by the old ones.

The planter made no objections to the change for he knew that no marked cards could thus be rung in on him, and tearing off the wrapper, the game was renewed.

By this time the wooding-up was completed and the Water Witch was again breasting the swift current, running by the light of the full moon. Their curiosity satisfied by the report of the mate, the passengers had for the most part returned to the interior. There were several games in progress in the office as well as in the gentlemen's cabin, the curtains and sliding doors having shut off view from the ladies' cabin, but the interest in the long protracted duel between Shaky Joe and the planter excited the greatest degree of attention, and a number of watchers gathered around, not a little to the secret annoyance of the former. He dare not object, lest suspicions of the fairness of his play be thereby awakened, and thus entirely foil his set purpose.

His scheme was a very simple one, and had there been no curious eyes to guard against save those of the planter, half drunk as he then seemed, a skillful manipulator like Shaky Joe would have found little difficulty in turning the trick. As it was, he kept his brain cool, betting carefully and only on good hands, watching his chances to steal the four aces out of the deck and stow them away on the "lower-deck" of the round card-table. All this he managed without suspicion being awakened, and was then all ready for business.

It chanced to be his deal, and as it was policy for him to make the bold stroke when his opponent had charge of the cards, Shaky Joe trusted to his regular hand that turn. It was a strong one, and he won the pot, barely outholding the planter, who uttered a savage oath and tossed the cards across the cabin, shouting for a fresh pack.

It was a bitter pill for the gambler to swallow, but he had no excuse for objecting to the change, and sullenly he accepted the situation. The cards were brought, evidently taken from the same gross as the others, as they were of the same pattern and quality.

The planter dealt, and Shaky Joe found two aces in his hand. He considered for a brief space, then discarded all but the pair, drawing three cards. In these he caught a third ace, and his ferret-like eyes glanced covertly into the face of his opponent. Good player though the young fellow was, he could not keep from showing to such a close observer that he had been very fortunate in the draw.

Shaky Joe, having that privilege as elder hand, passed. The planter coolly counted out a number of bills, "spreading" them so that a glance would determine the amount of his bet. There were five hundred dollars, and a terrible temptation began to assail Shaky Joe. He held seven of the eight aces which the two packs had contained at his disposal. The planter had drawn three cards, like himself, and the fact of his (Shaky Joe) catching another ace in the draw, proved clearly enough that his opponent was holding kings or less. There was only the faint risk attending that fourth ace to deter him, while the rich store of the planter urged him on—and as Shaky Joe counted out enough

to cover the bet and raise it one thousand, he resolved to make his stroke for a fortune then and there.

As he had anticipated, from that tell-tale flush, the plucky planter never thought of "calling" him, but covered the "raise" and then continued adding to the pot. And while he was thus engaged, Shaky Joe stealthily secured the ace of diamonds, which he lacked to make his hand invincible, from the store hidden in the lower deck.

"I see your raise, and top you ten thousand dollars!" quietly uttered the young planter, casting a keen glance into the quivering face of his adversary.

"I haven't that sum about my clothes, but I suppose you will grant me the privilege of borrowing? I only ask ten minutes," said Shaky Joe, placing his cards in full view on the table-edge, and weighting them down with a derringer.

"Certainly—it is your right," was the polite reply.

Shaky Joe arose from his chair, casting a swift glance around him. He caught a glimpse of the man he wanted in the office, and stepping hastily that way, opened the glass door and called Gideon Gillespie by name.

That worthy, pale as a ghost but outwardly as calm as though he had not such a short while before hurled the woman whom he had given the sole right to his name down to what seemed certain death, responded promptly, and the two men turned so as to command a full view of the card-table, as they conversed in guarded whispers, eagerly watched by the spectators.

"It's a dead sure thing!" muttered Shaky Joe. "I've got four aces, and the fellow has a hand that he's willing to bet his plantation on. Just lend me the money for five minutes!"

"Why take so much trouble, when in a little while—"

"But what I win now, won't have to be divided up in the general pile," grinned the gambler, knowingly. "You won't go back on me that way? There's no possible chance to lose!"

Gideon Gillespie strode toward the table, and Shaky Joe showed him the face of the cards. Without another word, Gillespie counted out the required sum, then drew back. Shaky Joe dropped the bank notes on the pile, crying:

"I only wish it was a million, but us poor devils are compelled to creep before we can fly. I call you, Mr. Stone!"

Letting his cards speak for themselves, as all good gamblers will, the planter deftly "strung" his hand, showing four kings and a small card to complete the five.

"No good, my dear sir!" laughed Shaky Joe.

"Who says so?" sharply demanded the planter, all traces of drunkenness vanishing like magic, his face flushing hotly, his eyes flashing vividly. "We are not playing royals!"

"Of course not, my dear sir," coolly retorted Shaky Joe as he deftly spread his cards alongside the other hand. "But I believe four aces lay over kings, all the time!"

His quivering hand was stretched out to rake down the goodly pile, when it was knocked rudely aside by his opponent.

"Not yet, my fine card-sharp!" he grated, the picture of fiery determination. "We'll argue that point a little before you claim the pot, and these gentlemen around us shall be the judges. I claim foul play! And to show you the proof, let any disinterested person in the company lift the discards in regular order."

"You dare accuse me of cheating?" hoarsely muttered the gambler, turning livid and trembling with more than his disease. "I'll make you swallow those words—"

"When and where you please—as soon as your foul play meets the exposure it merits," was the swift retort. "I held the ace of diamonds in my first hand. I kept a pair of kings and discarded the ace, with two other cards. Turn the pile, somebody, and if I lie, the loss be mine!"

An eager hand turned the cards which had been discarded according to rule, and still lay separate from the deck. And there, the second card from the top, as they originally lay, was the ace of diamonds!

"Four kings lay over a foul hand, I believe," parodied the planter, reaching one hand for the stakes, while with his other he deftly knocked the derringer to the floor.

With a snarling curse, Shaky Joe flashed out a knife and drove it through the throat of his adversary!

CHAPTER XIX.

A MAN FOR THE EMERGENCY.

ALMOST too swiftly for the astonished eye to follow, Shaky Joe dealt that vicious stroke, the keen-pointed blade, razor-like in its sharpness, cutting through flesh and muscle as though they were naught but paper, his weapon passing entirely through the throat of the unfortunate planter from side to side. The murderer gave his weapon a terrific wrench that tore it from the horrible wound, almost severing the head from its trunk, the resistance caused by the windpipe and muscles of the

throat, causing the murdered man to fall forward across the table, his blood gushing in a frightful stream over the gold and bank notes. One wild, gurgling scream, then he lay a dead man above the money and the telltale cards!

With cries of horror the spectators fell away from the spot as the assassin flourished the blood-dripping blade above his head, glaring madly around him, his eyes like those of a wild beast, his quivering lips drawing back from his pointed teeth in a savage snarl.

"Hands off! Keep your distance!" he grated, darting swift glances around him to guard against being taken by surprise as he stooped and secured the derringer which the luckless planter had knocked to the floor. "The man that tackles me will sup sorrow! I only defended my honor—no man can attack that and live!"

Ever following close on the heels of an unexpected deed of violence of this description, there are a few moments of time during which those who may chance to be spectators are actually incapable of action or connected thought. It is this universal fact that so often enables the criminal to make good his escape from the immediate scene of his crime; and it was this that, though he could not really seek safety in flight, being cut off from the shore, gave the murderer time and freedom to gain a position where he could not be surrounded or attacked from the rear.

Clipping the heavy back of the bloody bowie-knife between his teeth, Shaky Joe produced the mate of the cocked derringer which he gripped in his left hand, and threatening first one and then another of the pale-faced, startled passengers, he fell back until he reached the right side of the cabin.

"Keep back, gentlemen!" he grated, the words hissing past the red-dyed blade betwixt his teeth. "Touch a weapon or take a single step toward me, and I'll stretch some of you out to keep that dead dog company!"

The brain of the assassin was very busy, for he knew that the chances of escaping the consequences of his dastardly crime were greatly against him. If he could once escape from the cabin and gain the outer air, there might be some hope for him. He knew that he had plenty of friends on board the *Water Witch*, but he also knew that those friends were bound by the oath which he had broken in his fit of madness at being detected while playing a foul hand, and that they would allow him to reap the full consequence of his folly, unless the time for dealing their great stroke was ripe.

As he warned the passengers back, Shaky Joe dropped one hand to his side, stealing it behind him as though to assure himself that his other weapons were in readiness, but in reality his fingers sought the knob of the door against which he stood, turning it and trying to open the barrier. To his dismay and actual terror, he found his state-room was locked!

Deftly as his action was performed, a pair of keen eyes detected it, and a warning voice cried out:

"Look out! He's trying to dodge through the state-room! He'll risk a dive and swim rather than the rope he so richly deserves! Around and cut him off!"

A dozen men started to spread out and gain the line of state-rooms to carry out this excited advice, but Shaky Joe extended his arms to cover the line, grating viciously:

"Hold! keep your places! I'll kill the first two who try to dodge into those holes! Back, you infernal bloodhounds!"

A single determined man whom certain death stares in the face, has this great advantage over a mob, as long as he can refrain from dealing his blows; knowing that one, two, or more lives must be sacrificed before the victory is won, each atom of the greater force believes that some other unit can be better spared by the world, and thus it comes that too frequently a blood-stained criminal succeeds in escaping altogether.

Shaky Joe stood alone against nearly two-score, all of whom were more or less thoroughly armed and accustomed to use the weapons they bore, while he had but his knife and two bullets to pay for his life. Two-score men, and each of them looking for some other to take the lead and receive the penalty of bravery!

"Keep your places, gentlemen!" warned the murderer once more, his ferret eyes, now gleaming redly as though they were bathed in the blood of his stiffening victim, roving swiftly from side to side, ever on the alert against a hostile movement. "I don't want to hurt any of you, but you can't play lynch-law on me this trip! I only defended my honor, as the best among you would have done if charged with foul play, and you knew that it was all a put-up-job to skin you out of your honest money!"

"I defy any man to say truthfully that he ever caught me playing an unfair game of poker. When I can't win on the straight, I'll never try to take crooked. Look at it for yourselves, gentlemen! That fellow dealt the cards. How

often in single-handed poker is it that two such hands—the highest in the deck—come out on the same turn? He only claimed that I held one ace by trickery. The deck was a fresh one. What chance had I to stock up? None! The scoundrel stole an ace to trap me with, from the old deck before calling for a fresh one, then put up a cold hand on me, not only to gouge me out of my hard-earned money, but to cry cheat and foul play the better to hide his own rascality!"

Shaky Joe paused, probably feeling that he was getting himself seriously tangled up in his hasty explanation of what might but had not happened. And then, too, a small, plain-looking man stepped to the front.

"Back, you!" snarled the murderer, covering the little man with one derringer, his eyes glowing viciously. "Back, or I'll scatter your brains all over the cabin!"

The little man paused, but he did not retreat an inch. He quietly turned the palms of his empty hands toward Shaky Joe, uttering in cool, almost contemptuous tones:

"You wouldn't shoot an unarmed man—would you, my dear fellow?"

"I'd shoot my own father if he dared to crowd me now!"

"Am I crowding you, Shaky Joe?" and the cool hand even laughed as he spoke. "I don't want to crowd you, but as no other gentleman in this crowd seems desirous of coming to the front, I thought I might as well make myself conspicuous."

"You will be—as a corpse, if you dare come one foot closer!" snarled the gambler, viciously.

"Now don't make an ass of yourself, Joe Baldwin. I'm going to take you in out of the damp, and you're not going to lose your only chance of saving your throat by boring my brain-pan, boldly as you talk."

"I'll never yield while I can pull trigger or hold a knife! And I'll make sure of you at the jump-off!"

"As well me as any other, if it has to come to that," was the careless retort. "But you're going to listen to sober reason, captain. You know that when a man of my caliber says in public that he means to do a certain thing, do it he will if it takes a leg. I said I meant to take you in out of the damp, for want of a better hand at the bellows, and in you've got to come—warm if I can convince you, but cold if you will have it that way. Take your choice, Shaky Joe!"

"I'll never yield to be lynched—"

"Nor do I ask it!" was the swift reply. "I pledge you my word as a white man that there shall be no hanging without a fair and legal trial. To save any further bloodshed, I am confident these gentlemen will back up my pledge," and he turned with an inquiring bow toward the eager spectators.

There was a brief silence, no man caring apparently to utter his opinion first; but then one of those who had been playing at the same table with the murdered planter just before the fight between the two roustabouts broke up the game surlily growled:

"What show did the hell hound give poor Stone? It was a bloody murder, committed by a detected thief and cheat!"

"That's so!" chimed in another. "And the rascal would dodge the gallows if we were fools enough to turn him over to the law! Lynch the bloody cheat say I!"

The little man showed his teeth in a sarcastic grin.

"Then, gentlemen, of course you are ready to take up the affair right where I leave it off? I'm not in favor of lynch law, because experience tells me that it murders more innocent men than it punishes guilty. I resign my hand to you—there, is the pot; rake it in—if you have the sand!"

But neither of the two whose voice was raised for hanging showed any inclination to assume the responsibility, and as Shaky Joe turned the frowning muzzles of his derringers upon them they shrunk tremblingly back.

"You are too modest to take such a prominent role?" the little man laughed quietly, then adding: "Is there any other gentleman in this crowd who thinks he can master the situation? Don't be bashful gentlemen. I don't banker after the position if I can shift it on any other shoulders. What! not one among you all volunteers? Then, Shaky Joe, it's you and I for it after all!"

"Keep back!" warningly cried the murderer. "I don't want to kill you, for you're a man every inch! but I'll never give up to die like a sheep-killing cur at the end of a rope!"

"Nor shall you," was the quick reply. "I pledge you my word of honor that there shall be no lynching done while I can raise voice or weapon against it. Gentlemen, who among you will second me in this? Promise this man a square deal and he will surrender. Refuse, and take him who will—I wash my hands of the whole affair."

Gideon Gillespie stepped forward first of all. "It is no more than fair. He swears that it was a put-up job on him. I cast my vote in favor of giving him a fair trial, then of stretching his neck if he is proven guilty!"

This was the entering wedge, and one by one nearly one-fourth of the party sided with the first two.

But still Shaky Joe kept his weapons leveled, a dogged resolution written on every feature.

"Talk is cheap, but you can't catch me with empty wind!" he growled, sullenly, "I've seen little snaps like this before and I know how easy it is to break promises made after this fashion."

"What more do you ask? You have our word for it, man!"

"And I believe that you give it in perfect good faith, too. I don't doubt you, but those hounds who can growl when a man faces them ready to strike back, but who'll be eager enough to flesh their teeth the moment they think they can do so without getting paid back. The moment I gave up my arms, they would shoot me down—and once dead, you wouldn't deal very severely with them!"

"If that is all, we can fix it easily enough," was the cool response, as the little man moved toward the table and placed upon it a knife and brace of pistols. "Gentlemen, I beg of you to follow my example. All we want to see is justice performed. That will be better served by capturing a live criminal than taking a dead one, after losing two or three other lives in addition. Come! disarm, and then fall back!"

Gideon Gillespie imitated the example thus set, and his mates did likewise. Their action seemed contagious, and one by one the remaining passengers added their weapons to the rapidly-growing pile, then falling back beside Gillespie.

In five minutes from his own disarming, the little man saw that the job was complete. Then, without a tremor or sign of either fear or doubt, he walked straight up to the leveled pistols of the murderer, taking them from his reluctant hands.

Standing thus, side by side with the assassin, he cast a keen glance around the cabin. A peculiar smile lit up his hard, square face, and a still more peculiar laugh parted his lips as he uttered:

"Gentlemen, I thank you most sincerely for the trust you have reposed in me! As you see, I have disarmed the man you were afraid to tackle. I hold his weapons in my hands—and from the looks of them, I reckon each one carries a life in its throat, if held by one who can do them simple justice. I wouldn't be afraid to wager big money that I could send a blue pill through any particular brain in the company!"

As he spoke, the little man turned the pistols on the astonished crowd, his keen eyes glancing along the leveled tubes like those of a man who most decidedly meant business.

"What the foul fiend do you mean?" cried Gillespie.

"That I've got you just where I want you!" came the swift retort, as the little man uttered a sharp whistle. "Up with your hands, gentlemen, unless you are eager to visit the other world! I take command of this boat, if you please!"

There came a heavy trampling—doors of state-rooms were suddenly flung open—the doors of the office swung wide—and into the cabin marched masked men, bearing rifles and shot-guns, the muzzles of which centered upon the little crowd of disarmed men. They were entrapped, without the slightest hope of offering anything like a successful resistance!

CHAPTER XX.

THE FRESH-WATER SHARKS.

WHATEVER the intentions of the masked men, they were evidently resolved to trust nothing to chance. Their swift actions showed how well they understood the duty assigned to each, and not one minute elapsed after the little man uttered his whistle before every possible loophole of escape was guarded, and each passenger felt that at least one gun was covering his precious person in particular.

Two of the masks stood at the sliding-doors which divided the two cabins. Two others remained by the door which led into the office, while the remainder covered the group of astounded passengers. And then, cool and careless in all outward seeming as when he faced the leveled pistols of the murderer, the little man advanced to the weapon-laden table, holding all that pile of knives and firearms at his disposal.

"Gentlemen, I reckon we've got you right where the wool's short, but if there are any specially hot-heads among you who would rather chew a bullet than to live to die of old age in the midst of their families, the sooner they come up to the rack and take their fodder, the quicker the rest of us will reach a pleasant understanding. Who comes first?"

Flippantly as he spoke, it was sufficiently clear to the ones who naturally felt the deepest interest in his words, that the little man was talking business, pure and simple. In his steadily glowing eyes, in the steel nerved hands that held the pistols of the murderer with fingers on trigger and the muzzles covering the group, in each and every line that marked his square face, they could read grim determination of the sort that balks at nothing.

Armed, they might possibly have offered something like resistance, but without weapons, and covered by a score of ugly-looking guns, they could only huddle together, those in the outer circle plainly wishing they might exchange places with their more favored mates, in the center.

The little man watched them closely for a brief space, then the derringers were slightly lowered, and a cynical smile curled his thin, straight lips.

"If your sand could balance your prudence, gentlemen, I'm thinking there'd be but little profit in this venture for us. As it is, I'm almost tempted to swear that I will paint my face red and forswear my own race from this time on!"

Gideon Gillespie chanced to be near the center of the group, but evidently stung by this jeering taunt, he pressed forward to the outer edge, saying:

"Who the foul fiend are you, and what does all this mean, anyhow? If it is intended for a joke—"

"You fellows will pay the piper, whether you enjoy the masquerade or not," curtly interposed the little man. "Who am I? My good sir, you betray your ignorance of contemporaneous history by asking that question. Not to know me, argues yourself unknown. What does all this mean? Simply this: I have taken command of the Water Witch for the time being. The captain is snugly chewing a tough gag up in the Texas, with his doughty mate and the pilots to keep him company. A couple of my trustiest men are looking after the wheel, while—"

"A gang of river-pirates!" exclaimed Gillespie, with a curse of mingled rage and amazement.

"Fresh-water sharks, my dear sir, is a more polite term, and expresses the idea to perfection," coolly retorted the little man, carelessly covering the excited man with a pistol. "It may be just as well for you gentlemen to bear in mind that among my little army are some of our bluest-blooded aristocracy, who are particularly sensitive to anything that can possibly be construed into a slight or slur. Should you ruffle their feelings—the Lord have mercy on your souls!"

The little man cast a swift and comprehensive glance around him, taking in every detail of the curious scene. Then, with every trace of mockery banished from face and voice, he spoke again, rapidly and to the point:

"Gentlemen, my name is Richard Inglehardt, better known to common report as Devil's Dick."

He ceased abruptly, the ghost of a smile playing around his thin lips as he noted the universal surprise and even terror which greeted the announcement of his name. The few faces among the betrayed passengers which had until now retained their natural color, speedily blanched as they heard that name and title—the cognomen of one of the most desperate and bloodthirsty wretches who ever cursed the shape of mankind!

Devil's Dick! The annals of that now distant day, were lurid with the fiendish deeds of one who seemed to have no fear of either God or man; who robbed for pastime, and cut throats for the mere satisfaction of staining his hands anew with human blood! Wild tongued rumor gave him a thousand different shapes, all of them terrible and blood-curdling—none of them at all resembling this little man; but despite that, not one who heard him claim the title and looked into his eyes as he spoke, for an instant doubted his words.

"Devil's Dick, gentlemen," he added, in the same hard, metallic tone of voice. "I am going to turn over a new leaf and lead a different life in the future. I have grown tired of slitting throats and cutting purses, to say nothing of being hunted like a mad-dog—at a safe distance—by bands of valiant heroes who have sworn by all they hold holy to take me in out of the wet. But I have many expensive tastes, and in order to retire from business in good style, I have concluded to make just one more haul; hence this capture."

He ceased abruptly, covering Gideon Gillespie with his derringer, his eyes glittering viciously. Noted as he was for his nerve, the gambler flinched, shrinking from before those blazing eyes even more than the pistol.

"You are bound to serve as an example to the other gentlemen, Gideon Gillespie!" sternly uttered Devil's Dick. "You are counseling them to resist, are you?"

"Better be shot down while trying to defend our own than to have it spread all over the land that a score of us were outwitted and whipped by one man!" sullenly muttered Gillespie.

"Thanks!" laughed Devil's Dick, with a mocking bow. "I'll bear that in mind, my dear fellow, and send you the first card entitling you to a reserved seat in my master's dominions, when you succeed in working your mates up to the fighting pitch. At the same time, gentlemen, let me give you frank warning what the consequences will be: At your first move in rebellion to the present authorities—which is me!—my

men will open fire, and make each bullet count on live meat! There you have it. Now open the ball just as soon as pleases you!"

There was no sign of acting on his sarcastic suggestion. Instead, the outwitted passengers hung their heads and kept their empty hands elevated.

A clear whistle broke from the chief of the Fresh-water Sharks, and in obedience to it, three of the masked riflemen placed their weapons against the side of the cabin and moved toward the group of disarmed men. One of them untied a long grain-sack from about his waist; a second stepped close to the passengers, and looked at his chief for orders.

"Wait a bit," said Devil's Dick, with a grim smile. "No necessity in disgracing these honorable gentry more than we can help. You, ducky, step outside, if you please!"

It will be remembered that, at the wild death-cry of the murdered planter, Marcus Dineon and Moke Horner leaped from the state-room of the former, startled by the sound. They were silent witnesses of the scene which followed. Marcus recognized the man who had claimed to be his father, but he made no move either to assist or arrest him. And he, together with the Boss Roustabout, was included in the sweeping haul made by Devil's Dick when that worthy cast his net.

Showing his white teeth in an uneasy smile, Moke obeyed the order, stepping apart, casting a quick glance around as though meditating flight. If so, he was given no chance to make the effort, for at a sign from Devil's Dick the two men grasped him and rushed him from the cabin, pausing at the head of the steps in the office merely long enough to utter:

"Hunt your hole, nigger! But before you go, just catch hold of this bit of advice: You try to kick up a bobbery among the crew with that infernal rabbit-foot of yours, and you'll find some tough lads with orders to chuck you head first into the furnace, to help get up steam!"

One man pushed, the other man kicked, and the Boss Roustabout went down to the engine-deck with far more speed than grace. Then the masked men returned to the cabin.

"Gideon Gillespie, since you seem to banker after the position of chief, oblige me by stepping out two paces," coldly uttered the chief of the Fresh-water Sharks, emphasizing his words with a leveled derringer.

For a brief space the proud gambler hesitated, but then, as though seeing how utterly vain any resistance would be, he sullenly obeyed, to have his hands grasped by one of the masked men and a pair of steel hand cuffs snapped around his wrists, so dexterously that the deed was accomplished before he could move a muscle to prevent.

"Do your work, lads, and lively!" added Devil's Dick, in impatient tones, his eyes gleaming more vividly than ever.

The two men pushed the captive gambler over to where the fellow with the grain-sack stood, and he, with a skill and celerity that spoke volumes for his training, rifled the pockets of the prisoner, pitching money, watch, jewels and all into his convenient "safe."

By the time his task was completed, there was another of the passengers sullenly awaiting his attention, and at another signal from the chief, a fourth mask came forward, grasping Gillespie by his collar and unceremoniously forcing him into one of the state-rooms, closing and locking the door after him.

"This looks rather tough treatment, gentlemen, at the first glance, I admit," said Devil's Dick, with a grim smile. "You are fated to lose what valuables you carry with you, but that is the very worst you have to dread, so long as you act sensibly. Those who cut up rusty, and try to kick too hard against the pricks, will go overboard so quick it will make their heads swim—and as long as the head swims, no danger of life being lost!"

It was a grim, heartless sort of speech, but precisely what was needed at that moment. Many of the passengers had on their persons all or the greater part of their worldly wealth and the certainty of losing this beyond all hope of recovery, rendered them desperate enough to attempt resistance, could they see the faintest chance of success. As it was, with this significant warning ringing in their ears, they sullenly submitted to being ironed, robbed and then imprisoned in the different state-rooms, one man in each.

Fifth in the list, Marcus Dineon was singled out by the chief of the robbers, and though he quietly submitted, he was handled so rudely that his goggles were knocked off his face. Devil's Dick started and leaning forward over the weapon-laden table, gazed keenly into the young lawyer's face.

"I believe I have seen you before, my dear sir," he said, with a hard smile that revealed his yellow, tobacco-stained teeth. "If so, you have grown a very handsome beard since we last stood face to face. Lads, just give that miniature forest a little tug, will you?"

One of the masked men promptly complied, and started back with a little oath as the false beard came off in his hand.

"Good enough!" chuckled the chief, softly.

"Mr. Marcus Dineon, if I mistake not?"

Cold and stern, the prisoner gazed firmly into his malicious eyes, deigning no other reply.

"All right, my dear fellow! I can wait until business is not quite so pressing. You and I will have a little confabulation together, then! Clean him out, lads, and bundle him into a state-room. One of you fellows keep an eye on him, then."

When everything of value was taken from his person, Marcus Dineon was bundled into a state-room, one of the masked men entering with him, bearing a rifle in his hands.

"Orders is orders, boss," growled the mask, in a hoarse, peculiar tone of voice that seemed purposely disguised. "The chief give me mine, with that purty wink o' his, an' I'm bound to kerry of 'em out, if it takes a wheel off! You try to come any of your gum games on this chicken, an' you'll git the gaffs clean through your brain in a holy minnit—you hear?"

Marcus made no reply, seating himself on the side of the lower berth, ruminating deeply. Why was he treated with more severity than the other passengers? Why was a special guard placed over him? He could only ask the questions: to answer them lay beyond his power.

Meanwhile the game went on in the cabin. One by one the passengers were robbed, the grain-sack swelling into respectable fatness before all was done. Then, when the last of the men were attended to, Devil's Dick led a select few of his men into the ladies' cabin, closing the doors behind them.

Moke Horner went tumbling headlong down the stairs, only saving his neck by a desperate exercise of agility. But before he could recover himself, he was pounced upon by half a dozen men, foremost among whom were Purty Paddy and Teddy Huke.

"Augh! ye black devil!" snarled the Irishman, slapping the helpless negro on one cheek, then on the other, with a cruel force. "Sure an' I've gat ye now, right where I want ye! Wurruk the dirthy rabbit-fut av ye, why don't ye? Pit a charrum an us ye devil's imp o' darkness! Aiquil yerself to an bonist whoite gentlemon ag'in, will ye, ye dirthy scut!"

CHAPTER XXI.

DEVOID OF BOTH HONOR AND MERCY.

THE thoughts that busied the brain of Marcus Dineon as he half reclined on his berth, with his grim guard standing with his back against the locked door, rifle cocked and held so that the slightest dropping of the muzzle would cover his person, were anything but agreeable.

For himself he cared comparatively little, though he had been most thoroughly fleeced by the Fresh-water Sharks under the orders of Devil's Dick. To his own penniless condition he gave not a second thought, so intense were his apprehensions on account of Drusilla Ward. Even now, what shameful insults might she not be enduring? And with bated breath he listened, his muscles straining with an insane resolve to dare all in her defense, should he catch the sound of cries or pleadings for mercy from behind those closed doors.

"You do, an' I'll holler out your brain-pan so it'll sarve to wash hands in!" sternly uttered his watchful guard, reading his frenzied thoughts as clearly as though they had found utterance in the plainest of speech.

Fortunately, perhaps, no serious alarm came from the ladies' cabin, for Devil's Dick had laid his plans carefully and his men had carried them out without making a single mistake.

It was a curious affair from beginning to end, and it is not so much to be marveled at that the brain of the young lawyer, still feeling the effects of that midnight assault in the streets of New Orleans, throbbed painfully as he strove to untangle the twisted threads.

That wildly improbable charge which Shaky Joe had brought against him, bolstered up by such cunningly-contrived proofs; his own unexplained disappearance from the scene when he should have been most active in defending his honor; the damaging rumors which indefatigable Moke Horner brought him when he was beginning to recover his senses, though still too weak from fever and loss of blood to rise from his humble couch or even plan the discomfiture of his unscrupulous foes.

It was when his brain was half distracted that he concluded to take passage aboard the same steamer that was to carry the object of his devotions away from New Orleans; had he been in full possession of his wits, he would hardly have acted thus.

Secure in his disguise of false beard and goggles that effectually concealed his eyes, those most pronounced features of the human face, Marcus Dineon watched impatiently for a fair opportunity of speaking to Drusilla Ward in private, but, owing to the precautions which she took to avoid another and unwelcome suitor, thus far he had failed in his aim.

It is highly probable that the hot-blooded lover would ere this have cast aside his disguise and risked all in an open interview with Horace Ward, had Moke not told him of his discovery of the two men who he felt confident had attempted his life on that eventful night.

The faithful negro, too, spoke of the many secret conferences which took place among the white portion of the roustabouts, prominent among whom were the two suspected of the felonious assault. He believed they were planning a surer blow, having discovered the failure of the first, and suspecting their intended victim was secretly planning to bring them to the bar of justice for the crime.

It was this information that led to the risky experiments which Marcus Dineon made when Mokey Horner and Purty Paddy faced each other in the fight which ended so curiously. It was his voice that so unnerved the prize fighter, and it was his living face that put the Irishman to flight. He took off his false beard, and turning the green goggles so that the red light of the fire-crates shone through it, gave his pale and haggard countenance a truly ghastly appearance.

All this, with much more for which we can find no space here, Marcus Dineon ran over in his brain as he sat there guarded by one of the Fresh-water Sharks.

The Water Witch was still shaking from stem to stern with each stroke of her mighty engines, proving plainly enough that she was still plowing her way up the swollen river.

What were the ultimate intentions of Devil's Dick? Would he be content with the rich booty he had already secured, and when a favorable point was reached, desert the vessel with his masked crew? Or would he, the more certainly to delay pursuit and lessen the number of witnesses against him, commit some hideous crime—scuttle or blow up the steamer?

Turn whichever way he might, there was but scant consolation to be gleaned. The situation was a desperate one, without a single ray of hope that he could discern.

So gloomy and disagreeable were his thoughts, that Marcus Dineon rose up in his berth with a sound of actual pleasure as the inner door of his state-room was opened, to give admittance to Devil's Dick.

"Tell me—you have not injured her?" he muttered, hoarsely, his eyes glowing redly as he stared keenly into the smooth face of the little man.

"Haven't harmed a hair of her head, whom-ever you mean," was the careless response. "If you've got wife or chick in yonder, they are safe enough for the present, so don't worry."

Strange as it may appear, Marcus did not for one instant doubt the truth of the assertion, and he sunk back, his brain whirling, his blood tingling sharply through every vein. For a few moments it seemed as though he would suffocate with joy.

Devil's Dick gazed at him curiously by the dim light that came in through the open transom, his lips curling sardonically; but before that blinding mist passed away from before the vision of the young lawyer, the face of the notorious desperado was cold and inscrutable as a mask of stone.

"By the way, Mr. Dineon, have you any very serious objections to take a little promenade with me?"

"What do you mean?" asked Marcus, doubtfully.

"Just what I say, of course," was the somewhat tart retort. "If I beg as a favor what I have the right to enforce, it is because I know you are a gentleman. Being such, I would regret having to force you along like some surly prisoner going to the bar. If you decline, however, that is what it will result in. Do I make my meaning sufficiently clear for your comprehension, my dear sir?"

Marcus stared him full in the face for a few moments, striving to read there the truth, only to be completely foiled by the iron nerve of the desperado. Then he said, slowly:

"You have the power, as you say, and it would be worse than useless for me to think of resisting your will. I will go with you. If you mean to foully murder me, may Heaven pour down its vengeance on your guilty head!"

"I don't think Heaven troubles itself much about my private affairs," laughed Devil's Dick, with a shrug of his shoulders as he turned to the masked guard. "Open the outer door, lad, and then you can join your mates. I can look after this gentleman myself from this time on."

The Fresh-water Shark unbolted and opened the door of the lattice-work which opened onto the side guards, and linking one arm with his prisoner, Devil's Dick sidled through the narrow aperture and led the way toward the side ladder a few yards toward the stern from the state-room just deserted.

"After you, my dear sir," he said, slipping his arm free and motioning for the young lawyer to ascend. "There's hardly room for two to pass abreast, and I'm not much afraid of your jumping overboard before I can follow—with your wrists so neatly ornamented!"

In silence Marcus Dineon ascended to the hurricane-deck where he was promptly joined by the chief of the Fresh-water Sharks. Directly before them, standing near the stern of the Water Witch, was a tall, dark figure, closely enveloped in a heavy cloak, the collar

turned up to meet the slouched brim of his felt hat.

"A particular friend of mine, Mr. Dineon," said Devil's Dick, with an airy wave of his hand toward the somber figure. "He has long admired you from a distance, and now that an opportunity offers of forming your acquaintance, he really could not wait until day. Gentlemen, know each other!"

Acting on an impulse which he could not resist, Marcus stepped swiftly forward and with a stroke of his manacled hands, struck off the drooping hat which shadowed the face of the cloaked man. With an oath of angry surprise, the man jumped back, flashing forth a knife, while Devil's Dick caught the lawyer around the body, whirling him back with a display of strength not to be expected in one of his comparatively slight build, a savage curse grating through his clinched teeth.

"What do you mean, fool? Do you want to slit your own throat?" he angrily muttered, holding Marcus powerless.

"I merely wished to see the face of the one who honored me with his admiration," the lawyer laughed, shortly. "It is well for him that he took the precaution to mask his face!"

"And well for you, hot-head!" coldly retorted Devil's Dick, as he released his captive. "Had you caught a glimpse of his face, you would ere this be exploring the muddy bottom of the Mississippi river with a hole through your brains or an artificial mouth below your chin. Partner, I leave him with you for the present. Treat him kindly, and return him in as good order as his good sense or bad folly will permit."

Without another word he turned away and left the two men facing each other on the deck.

"Marcus Dineon," uttered the masked man, his voice deep and hoarse, plainly disguised; "your life is wholly at my mercy. I can take or I can spare it, just as I elect. If you prove yourself deserving, when we separate after this interview, you will be a free man, at liberty to go and come as you choose. You will have every article which those men took from you in the cabin, restored without price or reward."

Marcus Dineon watched the man closely, trying to recognize his shape or the tones of his voice, but in each particular he was doomed to utter disappointment. The heavy folds of the cloak prevented the former, and the mask which covered his face, lent its aid in disguising the voice of the unknown.

"You are wonderfully generous, my dear sir," retorted the young lawyer, sarcastically, as the unknown paused as though waiting for an answer to his opening speech. "In these degenerate days, a man seldom gives something for nothing, and highly as your worthy mate, Devil's Dick, seems to rate you, I do not believe you are to prove the exception to the general rule. Not to put it too plainly, you are attempting to bribe me. May I ask what it is you expect me to do in return?"

The masked man hesitated for a brief space, then said:

"You were once a favored suitor for the hand and fortune of Miss Drusilla Ward, I believe?"

The young lawyer started at this wholly unexpected question, and then a suspicion flashed across his brain that made his nerves tingle and his breath to come in a short gasp. But by a desperate effort he controlled his emotions.

"If you please, Sir Mask, we will not introduce the name of that, or any other, young lady into our conversation," he said, coolly. "When you can prove yourself an honest man, and show fair excuse for asking such an impertinent question, then I may possibly answer it. As it is, I firmly decline."

A short, hard laugh came from beneath the mask.

"You have answered the query with sufficient plainness, even had I needed to receive the assurance from your lips," he retorted, passing over the studied insult without notice. "I know that you have paid close attention to Miss Ward. I am aware that the fair lady smiled on your suit, until some compassionate friends kindly opened her eyes to your real character, showing you as the son of a guilty mother and an even less respectable father; as one who was speculating in advance on her prospective fortune; and as the husband of one wife, even while you were straining every nerve to secure another and richer if not more beautiful one!"

"All of which I denounce as lies, base as the brain that conceived and the tongue that uttered them!" impetuously cried Marcus, his enforced composure failing him.

With an agile leap, the cloaked figure placed himself so as to face the stern of the Water Witch, thus cutting Marcus off from the side ladders without trying to pass in the face of his gleaming knife.

"Keep your position, fellow!" he muttered, savagely. "I'm on my guard now against your tricks. Even if you could elude my weapons, you would soon be brought up with a round turn by some of the Fresh-water Sharks, as they call themselves!"

"Don't get frightened at your own shadow,"

contemptuously laughed Marcus. "I would not soil my hands by touching your vile carcass, when I know that the hangman has already marked it as his own property!"

The masked man suddenly recovered from the temporary panic which had so suddenly gotten the better of him, and his voice was cold and hard as he added:

"Lies or truth, they have poisoned the mind of Horace Ward against you, and he has sworn to shoot you at sight, as he would a mad-dog. The fair lady also believes you guilty—as how could she help it, in the face of such overwhelming proofs, to say nothing of your failing to keep your appointment? At the same time, like all silly girls who imagine themselves in love, a few soft words from your lips would doubtless convince her that you had been terribly wronged. For certain reasons which I need not dwell upon more particularly just now, I am determined to make this rupture between you two a permanent one. This can be managed by sending you to the other world, but I don't wish to treat you that severely, if it is possible to come to a more agreeable understanding."

"Once more, Marcus Dineon, I say that you can save your life and property, besides securing your immediate liberty, if you will take an oath such as I am ready to prescribe to pay a visit to Miss Ward, and in my presence swear to her that all those charges are true—that you are the lawful husband of Rose Enright."

For answer Marcus Dineon laughed, cold and scornfully.

"Beware!" sternly cried the mask, in his excitement forgetting the precautions he had thus far taken to disguise his natural tones. "It is your last chance for life! If you refuse to accept my offer, I swear to you by all that mankind holds holy, I will kill you without giving you time to mutter a single prayer for mercy or salvation!"

"Better the death of a man than the life of a cur!"

"If you do not value your own life, then consider the welfare of the woman whom you pretend to love. This boat is in the hands of men who know no mercy. They are on the point of taking it out of the river into a smaller stream, which is now high enough for her to run a score of miles inland, where there are no inhabitants save the wild beasts. There she will be run aground and destroyed. The passengers will be bound and left to share her fate—all save the women. Drusilla Ward will be given a chance to marry one who need not be mentioned by name at present. If she refuses worse will befall her. There is no possible way for her to escape dishonor save by wedding the man I refer to. She will refuse as long as she believes you are true to her. If you tell her what I have prescribed her courage will be broken and she will yield her consent to the—Ha!" he suddenly exclaimed, grasping the horrified lawyer by the arm and pointing to the abrupt change of course which just then took place. "See for yourself! The Water Witch is leaving the river to plunge into the very heart of the overflow."

It was indeed so. Guided by strong and skillful hands at the wheel the boat turned out of the rolling current, pushing her nose up what was ordinarily a shallow creek, but which now ran level with the Mississippi, having quite a powerful current, its waters extending far to either side half-way up the trunks of the trees.

One swift glance Marcus Dineon gave this, then his ironed wrists were lifted to deal a vicious blow at the head of the masked man, as he grated between his teeth:

"I know you now, Gideon Gillespie! To you I owe all this—you are the demon who would ruin my love!"

The stroke only took partial effect, for the masked man dodged, kicking the feet of his assailant from under him. And as he fell, Marcus was grasped in strong arms, borne to the rail, then released while his foe drew a pistol, and, thrusting it almost against his head, fired. With a gasping cry the poor fellow reeled over the rail, falling with a sullen plunge into the rushing waters!

CHAPTER XXII.

SATAN RECEIVES HIS DUES.

FIERCELY, remorselessly the assassin bent over the rear guards and watched for the reappearance of his victim, pistol in hand, ready to send another shot at his brain the instant his head should break water. Glowing redly through the holes in his mask, his eyes roved rapidly to and fro, noting each curling wave as it rose and broke after the Water Witch, with each second believing he caught a glimpse of his rival, only to discover the error before even his keen eye and ready hand could bring the derring to bear with certainty. And then, as full five minutes passed by without aught of Marcus Dineon, his murderer turned away from the scene of his dastardly sin.

As the Mississippi river was left further behind them, the new owners of the Water Witch put her under greatly reduced speed, barely

crawling up the sluggish current, which now wound through the trees. The boat was now threading its way through the overflow, though keeping carefully over what was in ordinary stages of the water, the bed of the creek. On either hand, before and behind, loomed up the tall forest trees beneath whose interlocked boughs all was dark and dismal. At sundry points along the stream, the tree-tops fairly met overhead, and at times the tall smoke-stacks snapped off twigs and smaller boughs until the deck was covered with the debris.

Even with the broad light of day to aid them, this sort of navigation would be difficult enough, and as soon as the gallant Water Witch was carried far enough from the river to insure her safety against being discovered by any other steamer making its way up or down the river, her engines were slowed still more, and boats were got out by means of which she was soon securely anchored—if one may call the process anchoring, when all the fastenings were above water, being huge cables attached to stout trees, drawn taut by use of the windlass, until the Water Witch was perfectly secure from any and all cross-currents or sudden changes of wind.

Much as had transpired on that night, it was not yet day when the boat was made secure, and still other exciting scenes were fated to occur on board the Water Witch before the rising of the sun.

The capture had been complete, without a single shot being fired or fatal blow given. The Fresh-water Sharks had made their arrangements carefully, covering every possible contingency, and the result was a clean sweep of the board.

The passengers were ironed after being robbed and disarmed, then locked up in the state-rooms. Guards with loaded rifles and shotguns were stationed so as to command every door, both inside and outside, and each prisoner was plainly given to understand that the first one who attempted to leave his place of confinement or to open communication with any of his fellow-sufferers, would be instantly shot to death.

Then, when this was perfectly arranged, and the Water Witch secured for the remainder of the night, the leaders in this daring outrage gathered in the office for the joint purpose of consultation and dividing the rich spoils.

They were only five in number, including Devil's Dick, Shaky Joe, both of whom were unmasked, and Gideon Gillespie, who still retained his disguise, in company with the two others.

Richard Inglehardt seemed to be in an unusually good humor, his eyes twinkling and his thin lips smiling.

"A glorious haul, gentlemen!" he exclaimed, turning from the chief clerk's desk where he had been rapidly adding up a long column of figures. "Enough to pay us for the risk we are running, and leave us generous wages besides."

"How much does it foot up?" asked Gillespie.

"Well, that depends," leisurely replied Devil's Dick, as he glanced over the sheet of paper. "If we count in the sum which Horace Ward deposited for safe keeping—"

"That is left out of the common pool, remember!" hastily interposed Gillespie. "You understand the arrangement which was made when I put you on the track of this windfall!"

"Exactly: your prospective father-in-law was to be handled with care, and all his property, including his lovely daughter, was to be transferred to your keeping, without harm or subtraction. I believe that was it?"

Gideon Gillespie nodded assent, but there was an uneasy light in his eyes. Promptly as Devil's Dick replied, and unequivocal as his words were, the gambler suspected he was plotting mischief, and he began to feel very much as though he had placed his rich feast under the care of a very hungry and very unscrupulous wolf.

"That alters the total, as I have figured it up here," resumed the chief of the Fresh-water Sharks. "The Water Witch was carrying fifty thousand dollars, belonging to the company, for use at the upper end of the line. That is the principal item which interests us outsiders. Then comes the amount paid in for freight and passage. From this, of course, will be deducted the amount each one of our little family passed over the counter. Next comes the cash, watches and jewels taken from our passengers. As you doubtless are aware, a few of them panned out richly—others not quite so well, while a few were hardly worth the trouble of stripping."

"Lastly we come to the money which cost young Stone his life. Ten thousand dollars of that amount belongs to you, G. G., as you staked it in perfect good faith. The remainder, of course, will go into the general fund for division."

Shaky Joe had not spoken a word while this talking was going on. He stood a little to the rear, one shaking hand clasping his quivering chin and nervously picking at his lip, his other hand crossing his breast and supporting his right

elbow. This was a favorite attitude of his, though it gave him a peculiarly hang-dog appearance, when taken in connection with his shifting, ferret-like eyes and that disagreeable infirmity of his.

He was clearly ill at ease from the first, looking and acting like one who has been detected in some disgraceful act. But now, as Devil's Dick uttered those words, he started forward with a sharp cry of objection:

"Not much! I reckon I've got a word or two to say about that! Play fair, whatever you do!"

Devil's Dick turned toward him, smiling until his yellow teeth showed in contrast with his red lips, his voice smooth and easy-flowing as oil itself:

"That sounds like a text for a sermon, coming from your lips, Shaky Joe! Fair-play is the flag you sail under, is it?"

The blood-stained wretch turned a shade more pallid, but there was an ugly light in his eyes and a dogged ring to his voice as he swiftly replied:

"When I am dealing with friends and partners, yes! I stand on even terms with the best of you in this little speculation. It was my skill and knowledge that picked out the majority of men whose aid was necessary to carry out this job. I did so with the understanding that I was to share as a full partner in the profits, and—"

"Have I said anything to the contrary?"

"Yes!" with a sullen side-glance into that smiling face. "You talk of putting my money into a general pot, instead of passing it over to me intact."

"You allude to the money which formed a cushion for young Stone to fall and die upon?" smiled Devil's Dick.

"Served him right!" was the muttered response. "I won it fairly, and he tried to kick against it!"

"Go slow, my dear fellow," laughed the chief of the Freshwater Sharks, again showing his teeth. "It's all very well to parade your wounded honor, and all that rot, before the eyes of strangers, but it won't go down here. You lie when you say that you won that pot fairly. You lied when you swore Stone put up a job on you, and did the ace-stealing himself. I saw you stowing away the aces, before Stone changed the deck, and I saw you fill your hand from that same secret hoard. I was just on the point of giving you a secret hint to drop your claim, when you used your knife."

Shaky Joe listened like one sitting on nettles, but somehow his usual dare-devil spirit deserted him in the face of this notorious desperado. He felt that in this little man he had more than met his match.

"You're mistaken," he muttered, sullenly. "I won the money fairly. But still, rather than raise a row over it, let it go. I'll be content with the amount I staked of my own."

"You staked it and lost. Everything goes, at poker, as you are quite old enough to know without my reminding you. You cheated, and when detected, you shed blood without—"

"That's a mighty queer sermon for you to preach!" sourly interposed Shaky Joe, with a short, hard laugh.

"What am I to understand by that, Mr. Baldwin?" coldly demanded Devil's Dick, every trace of softness vanishing from both voice and countenance as he confronted the gambler.

"That only for my action then, you would have found it a good deal tougher job to secure the passengers," hurriedly replied Shaky Joe, shrinking a trifle back.

"For which you have no right to claim the credit. In your greediness to secure the first bite at the peach, you risked your money and lost. You did this, killing that poor devil, knowing all the time that your rash actions might be the ruin of our carefully-laid plans. And now, you kick and squeal for the money to which you have not the slightest claim!"

"I only want a fair shake. Give me my rights—"

"By the Lord of Hosts! you shall have them to the very letter!" fiercely snarled the chief, as he leaped forward and made a grasp at the throat of the gambler.

Shaky Joe dodged nimbly, flashing out a knife, striking venomously at his assailant. The keen weapon just drew blood, and then the gambler went down before a swift stroke that left the impress of four iron knuckles on his forehead. And like a wild beast, Devil's Dick leaped upon his body.

Their three mates started and uttered exclamations of more or less excitement, but not one lifted hand to save the one or aid the other. Possibly they remembered that death in either quarter would but increase their own share of gold!

But it was not the intention of Devil's Dick to slay his antagonist with his own hand. He whirled the quivering wretch over on his face, wrenching his arms behind him, then snapped a pair of handcuffs around his wrists.

Though that blow was enough to have crushed almost any ordinary skull, Shaky Joe struggled to a sitting posture the instant his assailant left him, staring around in a half-stunned man-

ner, but shivering all over as the cold, measured tones of Devil's Dick saluted his ears:

"Gentlemen, one word with you. I dare assert that none of us are over-scrupulous when there is gold to be won; but at the same time, we are not common murderers, like this precious rascal. He was not content with taking his chances with the rest of us, but in his greediness to get the first taste of the golden harvest he risked ruining our carefully-arranged plans, and wound up by taking the life of an innocent man. It is true that I took considerable pains to save his life, and even he will not dare say I did not save him from the rope of the lynchers. It was through no love for him that I acted thus, but to win our own game. Still, had he not shown himself even more of a hog, I would have passed the matter by, though all of us will have to bear a share of his individual crime. As it is, I feel that he has richly deserved death. I put it to you, gentlemen: will it not be an act of simple justice to stretch the neck of the rascal, out of hand?"

"You don't dare—"

"Think so, you poor, miserable ghost of a man?" laughed the desperado. "What I don't dare wouldn't make a very large book! Get up with you—or shall I roll you down the steps like a bale of cotton?"

"Gentlemen!" gasped Shaky Joe, trembling like a leaf as those sinewy hands fastened upon him, dragging him to his feet and thrusting him toward the steps which led to the lower deck. "Gentlemen, I beg of you! Don't let him murder me!"

Not one of those appealed to answered a word, but as the chief of the Fresh-water Sharks shoved his victim down the flight, they followed after.

A number of the roustabouts, nearly every one white, met them with curious looks; and casting a keen glance over them, Devil's Dick singled out two, Purty Paddy and Teddy Huke.

"Here's a bit of work for you, my lads. This gentleman is growing too infernally high-toned for the likes of us common folk, and so I've concluded to promote him over the heads of you all! Rig a noose at the end of one of those balliards—and step lively about it, too!"

He nodded toward the flagstaff, and with the swift movements of men going about a work of love, rather than preparing the means for hanging one who had so recently put hard cash in their depleted pockets, the two rascals obeyed.

For the first time Shaky Joe seemed to realize the full extent of his peril. Until now, he believed Devil's Dick was simply playing to rob him of his share in the robbery which his cunning brain had done so much toward making successful; but now he saw that his life was to be taken as well, and he rent the early morning air with wild cries and pleadings, now cursing his enemies, now praying that they might spare his life, struggling desperately in that iron grip.

But he was helpless as a fly in the embrace of a hungry spider. Cold and unmoved, Devil's Dick held him until the rope was ready for his throat, then he turned him over to the tender mercies of his two executioners. They dragged him to the foot of the flagstaff, fitted the noose around his neck, then leaped back and joined their fellows in pulling away on the rope.

With a shrieking curse cut short by the choking noose, Shaky Joe was dragged from his feet and rapidly hauled up almost to the top of the staff, where he swung, kicking and writhing in a frightful manner as the rope slowly choked him to death! It was a horrible scene, but loud laughter and heartless jests were all the dying prayers or funeral sermon the blood-stained gambler received!

There was a hurried consultation between Purty Paddy and Teddy Huke while the poor wretch was struggling his last, and when Devil's Dick was about turning away, the former ventured up to him, tugging at his forelock and scraping one foot behind him, a sheepish grin on his hard-featured mug.

"Well, what is it?" sharply demanded the chief, thrusting one hand into his pocket. "I suppose you want the hangman's fee for turning off our genial friend, up yonder?"

"Av ye pl'aze, not jist the loikes av that, sor," grinned the prize-fighter. "But now we sort o' got our han's in, sure there's anither dirthy scut aboard that w'd be all the better for a bit av nicker-stritchin', your banner! Av ye w'd be pl'azed to jist give us l'ave, sor, divil the red cint w'd we charrange ye for that bit o' worruk, so we w'dn't, sor!"

"Why, you bloodthirsty villains!" laughed Devil's Dick.

"It's that infernal nigger he means, sir," respectfully interposed Huke. "He's trying to breed trouble in the crew, by parading his rabbit-foot, and we thought he would be better put out of the way of making more trouble."

"Only a nigger?" asked Devil's Dick, with a curl of his lip as he turned away. "Do as you please with him, for all of me. Gentlemen, let's return to our mutton!"

"May the blissid saints make your bed, sor!" cried Purty Paddy, dancing around like one suddenly gone crazy with pure delight, when he was caught by his mate, with a warning oath:

"Strike while you can, fool! He may take back the word in his next breath! Come—now or never!"

Purty Paddy, thus reminded, rushed past his comrade with a devilish grin on his ugly mug, not pausing until he stood by the side of Mokey Horner, who was lying near the stern.

"Augh! ye black devil, ye!" triumphed Purty Paddy, stooping and slapping his enemy in the face. "Sure ye want to git yer rabbit-fut to doin' av its worruk in a hurry, or it'll be foriver too late! We're goin' to stritch you' nick—"

He never completed his brutal sentence. With a savage howl, the Boss Roustabout leaped to his feet, a heavy bar of iron in his unbound hands, and two swift blows sent the two villains down with shattered skulls. Then, with a wild laugh, the desperate negro dove head-first into the swiftly flowing water, before a hand could be outstretched to arrest him!

CHAPTER XXIII.

FROM SCYLLA TO CHARYBDIS.

FOR a few moments those of the Fresh-water Sharks who had witnessed the swift and deadly onslaught made by the Boss Roustabout on his vindictive enemies, stared aghast at the terrible sight of those two skull-shattered corpses—for both Purty Paddy and Teddy Huke were dead men before their bodies could touch the deck!

Then a wild uproar ensued, and a score of eyes watched the negro to break water, half that number of rifles or shot-guns being held in readiness to riddle him with lead. But they watched in vain. Mokey Horner never rose to the surface within their range of vision, at least. Boats were got out and a careful search made for him, for hundreds of yards in every direction, but equally without success. And it was finally concluded that he had, in diving, struck bottom so violently with his head as to break his neck, and was then, in all probability, slowly drifting beneath the surface along the muddy bottom of the overflow.

At the usual hour, breakfast was prepared and spread by the cooks and waiters. The ironed passengers were led out in small companies, their hands set at liberty long enough for them to eat what they required, while half a dozen masked men kept them under guard with rifles and guns. The black stewardess was permitted to take food to the lady passengers, in their own state-rooms, Devil's Dick in person assuring himself that all was made safe afterward.

Not until this performance was over, did the Fresh-water Sharks release the well-secured Water Witch and once more steam slowly through the overflow. Almost creeping, at times keeping out boats with poles and hand-lines to mark and sound the crooked channel, much time was consumed in going a very short distance; but the outlaws apparently cared little for this. Under the most favorable circumstances, there were very few settlers located along their course, and all of these had long since been driven from their homes by the rising tide. They were so far away from the river proper, that there was comparatively no danger of curiosity being excited by the smoke from the stacks of the Water Witch; even should this be noticed, who would even think of investigating the cause?

Thus the day wore on until the afternoon was half-spent, when the Water Witch ran its nose so heavily into a muddy shoal that all thoughts of backing her off were quickly abandoned. They must either wait for the water to rise higher, or else complete their journey in the boats.

Devil's Dick and a tall, masked man, spent an hour or more rowing around through the watery waste together, and when they returned, both appeared to be in great good humor. The chief with his own hands rolled out a half-barrel of whisky from the bar and bade his men make good cheer. As a matter of course, they followed his advice to the very letter.

It was wearing well along toward midnight when a dark figure crept silently along toward the outside guards, his face toward the ladies' cabin. He carefully counted the lattice doors as he passed them, pausing at one and tapping gently against it. The faint murmuring which he had been able to distinguish within instantly ceased, and perfect silence reigned, save for the occasional burst of coarse laughter or drunken shouts from the office.

Again he tapped, then with lips close to the screen, he cautiously uttered:

"Mr. Ward, do not be alarmed. It is I—a friend—come to save you all from a frightful doom!"

"Who are you?" came the low response. "Must we be mocked and insulted, as well as barbarously treated?"

"I am a friend—don't you know my voice!" "Gillespie!" muttered the merchant, seemingly startled.

"Yes—come to save you from worse than death!" was the swift reply, as the crouching figure drew a knife and hastily cut away several of the slats, then reached in and drew the bolt that held the door fast, opening it and slipping inside.

It was indeed Gideon Gillespie, and as he cast a swift glance around the small apartment he saw by the light that came in through the open transom, Horace Ward, his wife and his daughter before him.

"Come!" he muttered guardedly, seeming to listen anxiously to the sounds which came from toward the bow of the boat. "I am risking my own life in the hopes of rescuing you, and the loss of a single minute may be fatal to our chances."

"Father—mother—do not trust him!" impulsively uttered Drusilla. "Better the evils we know, than to rush blindly into others which may be tenfold worse!"

The merchant also seemed to regard the gambler with a certain degree of suspicion. It is true, he had seen him among the prisoners who were led out to their meals, but how came he at liberty now, and armed? What chance was there of a single man's saving them, there in that trackless waste of waters?

"Hark!" muttered Gillespie, drawing a knife and bending forward like a panther about to make its deadly leap as the sound of hasty footsteps were heard crossing the ladies' cabin. "It may be too late now! But if too late to save you, Drusilla, I will die in protecting you—"

He abruptly ceased, as a coarse voice spoke without:

"How goes the game, mate? What luck?"

"The devil's own! I don't git a smell! You're to take your shake now, but the cream's gone a'ready! The boss hes got fust choice, an' he froze to the gal in yender—Ward's!"

"The boss! You mean Devil's Dick in course?"

"No—that cussed lawyer from Orleans—fergit his name. The one that got up the hull trick, they say."

"Durned ef I keer nuther. Well, take my gun an' I'll go fer a wife! Ef I hit it rich mebbe I'll whack up with you."

There was a slight rattle of arms, then hasty footsteps moving away. In breathless silence the inmates of the little state-room listened, then Gillespie cautiously whispered:

"You see now what I meant? The devils are playing for the ladies, and your fate, Miss Ward, seems to be already settled, unless I can carry you off from this hell afloat."

All doubts, all hesitation was swept away by those terribly significant words between the Sharks, and trembling with eagerness they listened to their pretended friend.

"I bribed my guard with a check for every dollar I have on deposit and he set me free, gave me arms and procured a small skiff for my use. I believe he is faithful, but lest he repent we must lose no time. Come, think what a horrible fate awaits all women here!"

While hurriedly muttering thus, Gillespie was knotting sheets and blankets together, forming a rude but substantial rope. He led the way out of the state-room, followed by Horace Ward, his wife and daughter.

Dimly visible by the moonlight which sifted through the thickly laced trellises, he pointed out a skiff which floated close under the guards.

"We must lower the ladies first then follow. Not a word or sound must be uttered, for discovery now would only precipitate your fate. Be brave—trust in us and all will be well."

Thus he whispered while tying the rope in a loop large enough for the women to sit in it while being lowered. Without a word Drusilla submitted to be lowered first, steadying herself in the frail vessel and assisting her mother to enter. Then Horace Ward followed, after him coming Gideon Gillespie.

Crouching low they listened with bated breath. Not a sound came to tell of awakened suspicion, and, cutting the rope which held the skiff to the steamer, Gillespie pushed it far away into deeper shadow. He softly secured the oars, and then with cautious strokes that awakened not the faintest echo, he worked the skiff still further away, increasing his efforts as the shape of the Water Witch grew more dim and indistinct.

"Now," he uttered with a short, hard laugh as he bent to the oars with redoubled energy, sending the light craft rapidly through the overflow, "let the bounds yelp as they may, I care not. Water leaves no trail, and I defy them to overtake us in this trackless wilderness!"

Horace Ward drew a long breath of relief as he cast a quick glance around him, his heart beating with something of its wonted regularity for the first time since overhearing the brief conversation of the guards in the cabin. And yet, as he saw how gloomy it was there beneath those old forest trees, how easy it seemed for even one thoroughly acquainted

with the locality under its usual aspect to become bewildered, and uncertain which one of the many twisting, intricate aisles to follow, a new fear assailed him.

"We are all very grateful to you, Mr. Gillespie," he said, in tones that betrayed this new anxiety; "but are you certain you know the way? It looks so easy to get lost here!"

"So we lose the old Water Witch and those who have taken possession of her, I care little for anything else, just now," was the light reply. "Bearing in mind on which side of the river we entered the overflow, it will not be difficult for us to gain the Mississippi or run over to the high lands, whenever we think best. The current will direct us, there."

"But you are crossing the current!"

"Precisely," was the quiet response. "Your escape cannot go long undiscovered, and then hot search will be made for you by the thieves and robbers. They will naturally take the back track, and many arms might easily catch up with one pair."

"Then you mean to hide?" doubtfully asked Ward.

"For the present, yes. Those arch villains will be afraid to linger long near the boat, when once they know we have escaped. They will fear our return—my return—with aid, and they will take to the hills to-morrow. We will be safer if we do the most of our traveling by day. A sunken snag or bit of driftwood in the dark—you see!" he gasped, with difficulty righting the almost overturned boat as it struck a snag or submerged stump with a sidling blow that almost pitched them into the muddy water.

Horace Ward was silenced, if not convinced, and little more was said until Gideon Gillespie, nearly two hours after leaving the Water Witch, drove the bow of the skiff on a bit of dry land, scrambling out and holding the craft steady while the merchant assisted his wife and daughter ashore.

Just where they landed it was dark and gloomy, but a little way beyond, a break in the tree-tops suffered the moon to shed its silvery light on the earth, revealing a gently rounded knoll, surrounded on all sides by the steadily rising flood.

Hastily securing the skiff, Gideon Gillespie produced a small lantern from the bow, and lighting it, led the way over the damp ground to the highest point, where it was drier.

"We will spend the night here," he said, turning away without waiting a reply, snapping off dead branches from the surrounding trees, breaking them up into convenient lengths, cutting the driest into small shavings. A few minutes later he had a small fire burning, its genial warmth proving most acceptable to the ladies in that damp atmosphere. And Horace Ward also enjoyed it most thoroughly, though at first he looked upon building it as a most imprudent action.

"There is little or no danger," replied Gillespie. "We are in just the opposite direction from that which it will be most reasonable to look for us, and we are half a dozen miles away from the Water Witch. Besides, it may save the ladies from catching the chills."

Then he broke off a quantity of small limbs with which he covered a space of ground, around which he soon buddled larger boughs, forming a rude hut where the ladies might be in comparative seclusion, yet close enough to the fire to feel its comforts.

The two men sat near, doing little talking through the long hours which intervened between their arrival and dawn.

Then, when the moon sunk from sight and the light of the rising sun began to appear in the gray East, Horace Ward broke the silence, broaching a subject over which he had brooded all through the night:

"Gillespie, can you explain the meaning of what we heard pass between those two rascals, before leaving the boat?"

"Yes," was the slow answer, with a side glance toward the brush hut. "You remember I bribed my guard to remove my irons and permit my escape, with you? It took all of my money, but I counted that cheap, when he told me the plans of those arch fiends! They were to decide the possession of the women by playing cards for them—all save your daughter."

"But they spoke of some one winning her!"

"That was a blind to prevent a cry of favoritism. Her fate was decided before the Water Witch left New Orleans."

"Then I was right in suspecting—" hesitated Ward, his face showing pale and deep lined in the growing light.

"You were," slowly replied Gillespie. "I would rather not tell all I heard from that man. Your daughter has never been just to me, though Heaven knows I would give my life ten thousand times over for one tithe the love she has lavished on that infernal scoundrel who thought to make her his victim, through his lust for your wealth!"

"There can be no doubt! May not the fellow have lied?" asked Ward, still loth to give up all faith in the man whom he had both loved and respected up to a few days before.

"You heard what they said. That lawyer—"

from New Orleans was none other than Marcus Dineon!"

"A lie, false as the vile lips that utter it!" cried an indignant voice, as Drusilla sprang out of the hut and confronted the speaker. "You slander a gentleman whose honor is pure and unsullied—whose virtues are as far above your comprehension as heaven is above Hades!"

Stung to the quick, Gideon Gillespie leaped to his feet, his eyes flashing, his voice full of menace:

"I repeat my charge, and I can prove every word I utter! Marcus Dineon, finding his duplicity discovered, came on board the Water Witch in disguise, his plans all laid to win the fortune in pursuit of which he had already contemplated bigamy. He was chief of the gang that captured the boat, Devil's Dick simply acting as such to cover the prime criminal. He reserved you and the fortune in money which your father had in the captain's safe, for his share of the plunder. He swore that unless you married him, you should be dishonored—"

Horace Ward caught the infuriated man by the arm with a stern force that cut his speech short. For one instant Gideon Gillespie glared savagely into his face, then, with the long-pent-up lava flood bursting loose, he struck him a terrible blow with his fist that felled him like a log! Leaping upon him, he clasped a pair of hand-cuffs around his wrists, then wheeled and clasped Drusilla in his arms as she was darting to aid her fallen parent. A ferocious laugh broke from his lips as he held her helpless, while Mrs. Ward, still ill, her nerves shattered by the trying scenes on board the captured vessel, staggered forth from the hut and sunk with a wailing cry across the senseless body of her husband.

"Struggle all you will, my dainty bird!" he laughed, holding the maiden helpless, pressing his hot lips to hers, casting off all pretense at disguise in his mad exultation. "I've got you now, and all the powers of heaven or hell cannot tear you from my hands, before I have reaped a delicious reward for my long servitude! You have had your time, and right royally you ruled, trampling my heart into the mire with-out—"

"Your heart, base villain!" she gasped, even as she vainly struggled to escape him, unable to restrain her loathing.

"For every word of scorn a kiss!" suiting the action to his words. "You are mine—mine alone! If you still frown, I will bind your parents hand and foot and leave them here to die of starvation, if the rising waters do not sweep them off to meet a more merciful death! Swear by heaven—by the One whom you worship—to marry me, the moment we reach a town, and I will save you all. Refuse, and I will kill them—I will serve you even worse!" and he hissed a few burning words into her shuddering ear.

"Help! save me!" she cried, little thinking who was near.

"You bet I des will! Drap her, you 'fernal willin'!"

With a savage curse, Gillespie wheeled upon the muddy figure which was rushing toward him, drawing a pistol and firing swiftly at the threatening shape. And with a boarse, mad howl of pain and fury, Moke Horner staggered back and fell prostrate, the red life-blood bursting from his face!

CHAPTER XXIV.

KALEIDOSCOPIC CHANGES.

THE sudden appearance of Moke Horner in answer to her terrified appeal, was quite as much of a surprise to Drusilla Ward as it was to Gideon Gillespie himself. For one fleeting instant she felt that she would be rescued from her base assailant, only to have the last hope dashed to the earth as she beheld the ebony athlete go down before the pistol of the villainous gambler. Then, with a wild, despairing cry, she turned toward her unconscious parents for protection.

Gillespie wheeled and darted after her with a savage curse, grasping her arm and drawing her toward him, his eyes glowing redly, his face flushed, his breath coming hot and fast.

"Not yet, my dainty darling! You are mine—all mine—"

Better for him had he taken a second glance at the Boss Roustabout; but the tide which had run so long in his favor, was now changing wholly against him, and it was so written.

Dizzily Moke Horner scrambled to his feet, dashing the blood from his face, still gripping that heavy club in his sinewy hands, glaring around for his enemy. He saw him, he heard that appealing shriek, and once more he bounded forward, swinging the club over his head and striking the instant he felt he could reach the dastardly ruffian.

A howling curse of pain and fury broke from the lips of Gideon Gillespie as that swift stroke fell on his arm near the shoulder, snapping the bone like a pipe-stem! He staggered, turned partly around, trying to snatch another pistol from its resting place—but that terrible club came whistling through the air once again, and he instinctively dodged, throwing up his sound arm to guard his more precious head.

The double movement succeeded, but at what

a frightful cost to the gambler! Hit just above the elbow by the butt-end of the club, the member was shattered, so swiftly and completely that the lower half flew up and back, the quivering hand striking its owner fairly in the face!

With a gasping yell of agony the most intense, Gideon Gillespie staggered and fell to the ground. The Boss Roustabout stood over him with uplifted club, blood dripping from his right cheek through which the gambler's bullet had torn its way, his eyes glowing, his white teeth showing viciously. His arms were bare to the shoulders, and the crippled man as he lay helpless, could see the magnificent muscles as they swelled preparatory to dealing the finishing stroke.

"Mercy! I am dying! spare me!" he gasped, writhing like a wounded snake, clinging to life even when so frightfully disabled that future existence would seem worse than death.

"Des de same kin' ob marcy you was gwine to show de missy yender!" grated Moke, gripping his club more tightly and aiming the blow full at the face that was turned appealingly upward. "You too cussed mean to lib—take dat!"

But even as the blow was falling, a wild scream from the lips of Drusilla Ward caused him to start and glance quickly in that direction, and as Gideon Gillespie rolled rapidly over at the same second, the club struck the earth instead of dashing out the brains of the gambler.

A howling curse of pain burst from the lips of the Boss Roustabout as the shock tore the club from his benumbed fingers, and for a minute the scene partook a little of comedy as the ebony athlete, hugging his tingling hands beneath his armpits, danced vigorously around, shouting, cursing and whistling.

Gideon Gillespie, totally disabled so far as attack or defense was concerned, scrambled painfully to his feet, while his terrible adversary was thus engaged, and staggered away toward the further extremity of the island.

Moke saw him and stooped for his club. Slippery with mud and slime, it escaped his grasp; and as Gillespie, warned by that savage cry, broke into a run, the ebony athlete dashed after him with empty hands.

"Top, you pizen sarprint!" cried the negro, with a wild laugh that was even more awe-inspiring than the fiercest threats. "You 'long to dis ole niggah! 'Top an' tek you' medicine, 'fo' I wuks de rabbit-foot onto yel!"

Gideon Gillespie reached the end of the island, staggering along a half-rotten log, one end of which extended out a few feet over the water, there running with quite a current. He hesitated. One step further would carry him into the water, which was quite deep enough to drown him, crippled as he was. The muscular hands of the negro were outstretched to grasp him. Which death would be the easiest? The water—and he threw himself forward with one gasping cry of utter despair!

Moke Horner shot along the log like some huge turtle, and with a swift grasp caught the gambler by one ankle. The shock almost dragged him after, but clinging to the log with his bare legs, the Boss Roustabout put forth his great strength, dragging Gillespie back until he could catch the other foot.

Strangling, the gambler no longer courted such a death, his head and shoulders working convulsively, his utterly disabled arms dangling helplessly in the water as he begged for mercy, offering fabulous sums in return for his life.

Leaning over the end of the log, Moke dragged him up until his face was clear of the water, then glared down at him, showing his teeth and laughing harshly as the drops of blood from his bullet-pierced cheek fell on that terrified face.

"You talk like fool, Marse Gid! Fink I don't know you? You pore, one-boss gambler, dat run skin-game fo' git 'nough money to cut splurge 'mong you' bettahs! You ain't got pica-yune fo' cross you' dirty heart wif!"

"In the skiff—thousands—take all, only spare my life! I'm dying, now!" groaned the miserable wretch.

"An' who bettah 'sarves to die like cussed dog?" savagely grated the negro as a fresh pang reminded him of his bullet-pierced cheek. "Who wuk all dis trouble? Who lay plans fo' 'tealin' de ole Water Witch? Who kill he own wife by 'trowin' her in de ribber? Who murder Marse Marcus Dineon? Who 'buse dat young missy ober dah! You, cuss you' black heart. You done it all! You hab ten fousan' hearts, I tek um all to pay fo' dat! You chuck folks in de water—tek some you'self an' see how you like it! Ho! ho!"

Leaning still further over the end of the log, grasping the crippled gambler by each ankle and holding him at arm's-length, Moke Horner soused his captive under the muddy water, holding him thus despite his convulsive struggles, laughing like a very demon of vengeance.

Whether he really meant to hold him thus until death came to his release, can only be surmised, for just as the wild struggles of the gambler were growing fainter, a skiff shot

swiftly out from the bushes, and a strong pair of arms caught Gillespie around his body, tearing him away from his enemy. At the same instant a pistol cracked, and with a single convulsive start, Moke Horner lay motionless along the log.

"Out and steady the boat!" sharply cried the man who had caught Gillespie, and as his orders were obeyed, he reversed the position of the gambler, then bore him to land, handling him as readily as though he had been no more than a child, though himself far from a giant in size or weight.

"Devil's Dick—thank God!" feebly gasped the gambler.

"Some of you fellows bring him to," uttered the desperado as he carelessly dropped the fainting man to the ground and turned away to where he noticed the Ward family.

By the liberal use of whisky, Gillespie was restored to consciousness, groaning with agony the most intense from his frightfully-shattered arms. Gravely the Fresh-water Sharks eyed the sufferer. They knew that such injuries could hardly help but prove fatal, unless efficient aid was soon given him. And the gambler also realized this, for as Devil's Dick drew near, accompanied by the Ward family, he gasped:

"Take me back to the boat, Dick! The doctor—I'm dying—be quick! Take me—oh! this is worse than death!"

The desperado folded his arms and stood gazing into his pain-distorted face with not the slightest gleam of pity in his hard eyes. And his voice was very cold as he spoke:

"If I could soothe your pain—if I could restore you to perfect manhood by simply lifting my hand, Gideon Gillespie, I would not move even my little finger! You betrayed the trust we placed in you. You violated your solemn vows, given when you begged me to aid you in winning the lady you pretended to love. You asked us to make her and her parents believe you were a captive; that Marcus Dineon was the actual chief of our gang, when you, yourself, filled that position—"

A gasping cry of joy from the lips of Drusilla Ward interrupted his measured speech, and turning upon them, as though just reminded of their presence within earshot, he signed his men to lead them away.

"Stow them in the other skiff, and then wait for me," he said sharply, turning again to the groaning gambler as the Ward family were conducted across the island.

"I reckon I have spiked your guns in that quarter, my dear lad!" with a mocking laugh. "You miserable fool! Did you for a moment believe that I intended to let you skim off all the cream, and get safely away with it? Not a bit of it! I had you marked all the time. If that nigger hadn't interfered as he did, I would have dropped you myself."

"What do you mean?" gasped Gillespie, faintly, shrinking from that merciless gaze. "Are we not friends—allies?"

"Well, hardly! We were, perhaps, until the game was won; but as I have no further use for you, you have to step aside. You ask too much of the plunder for any one man, and I have mates with whom I had rather divide than with you. Listen:

"We made a fine haul, but it is not enough to furnish a fortune for nearly two score men. It will just comfortably provide for four."

"No sooner were you safely off for this island, as we two agreed beforehand, than I got in my pretty work on the lads. I gave them drink doctored so stiff that in half an hour, not a soul of them but the three who were partners with me, could hold up their heads! We tied them, hand and foot, then came off after you. We thought you carried off more than your share of the plunder, to say nothing of the lady."

"You promised—" gasped Gillespie, great drops of pain-sweat standing on his temples.

"Admitted," with a cold laugh. "I promised because you knew more of the men than I did, and I wished to avoid any unnecessary trouble with them. But all the time I intended to cut your comb, just as I have done."

"I am going to take you back to the Water Witch. I will bind your legs—your arms are already pretty thoroughly fettered! I will lock you up in your state-room, and leave you there to starve or die, as fate wills. It may be that you will be rescued in time to save your life. I hope so, for the sake of the others whom I intend leaving in the same helpless fix."

"With my mates, I will take the plunder, and strike out for fresh pastures. After this day, Devil's Dick will be heard of no more! I will settle down in life as an honest citizen, and may even become a deacon in some church—who knows?"

With a heartless laugh he picked the crippled man up and dropped him into the boat, entering and rowing around the island to where the other skiff lay. At a word from him, his three comrades helped Horace Ward, still weak and dazed from that stunning blow, into his boat, taking the two women into the skiff which had brought them to the island. Devil's Dick led the way through the overflow, the other boat following.

Gideon Gillespie had cunningly deceived his

passengers as to the distance they were from the Water Witch, by rowing in a devious course, marked out the day before. By rowing little more than a mile, Devil's Dick reached the steamer, and running his boat alongside, he made it fast, tossing the crippled gambler on deck, scrambling after him.

"Hand out the ladies first, boys," he muttered, securing the painter tossed him, and then catching Drusilla as she was passed within reach.

Horace Ward managed to reach the deck unassisted, and when his trembling wife was passed out of the other boat, he caught her in his arms and carried her to the steps leading to the cabin-deck, followed by Drusilla.

The three outlaws leaped on deck, and were starting after their chief, when a loud voice thundered:

"Surrender, you devils! or we'll blow you through!"

With cries of amazement the Fresh-water Sharks turned, to behold a strong force of armed men rushing toward them, from behind the ranks of wood and from the engine-rooms.

A howl of fury burst from the lips of Devil's Dick, and he jerked a pistol from his belt, only to reel back with a snarling curse as a bullet shattered his good right arm.

"Hands up, or die!" repeated that stern voice.

"It's sure death, anyhow!" grated the desperado, flashing forth a long blade with his left hand, and leaping upon his enemies. "On 'em, lads! Cut your bigness through the hounds!"

Rallying, the three Sharks drew weapons and followed their chief, with savage yells and curses.

"Fire!" cried the leader of the enemy, discharging his own pistol when its muzzle almost touched the face of Devil's Dick, who reeled back with a horrible screech of agony and baffled rage, sinking to the deck, but even then showing his wonderful nerve by casting his knife with deadly force full at the breast of his slayer.

More by good fortune than aught of skill, it was warded off by the stout pistol-barrel. Then—the end came. And three men lay riddled with bullets beside their dead chief!

Trembling, terror-stricken, the Wards stood unable to flee, staring at the wild *melee*. But then, with a glad cry, Drusilla darted forward and clung to the neck of the man whose weapon had laid Devil's Dick low in death, as she sobbed:

"Marcus, my love! At last—thank Heaven!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BUBBLE BURSTED.

ONCE more in the cabin of the Water Witch.

Upon one of the sections of the long dining-table, a sort of couch has been formed, and on this lies a man whose brows are damp with the dews of dissolution. A sheet, dotted here and there with dull red blotches, covers him to the chest, but one can see that underneath this he still retains his clothes, damp and muddy though they be. They can see that both sleeves of his shirt have been cut off close to the shoulder; that the muscular right arm is swathed in bandages, lying by his side, inert and helpless; but the left! It is as though the same keen implement which amputated the sleeve, had taken its contents as well!

And this crippled, dying man was Gideon Gillespie!

Beside him, cooling his fevered brow, moistening his parched lips, hovered a pale, sad-eyed woman in black. Bitterly as he had wronged her, his sins were washed from her heart, if not from her memory. While he lay dying, Rose Enright could only remember that he was her husband, only feel that she loved him now, no whit less than when he wooed and won her in the bright dawn of her womanhood.

"There is no hope, Rose?" faintly gasped the gambler, his sunken eyes fixed wistfully upon hers.

"None—save in Heaven," was the softly whispered reply as she stooped and touched his lips with hers, then hastily averted her head, to hide the hot tears that leaped to her eyes. "The doctor said so from the first. There was only one chance—and that has failed us!"

She spoke the truth. There was a doctor among the passengers of the Water Witch, who, examined the crippled gambler, and found that while one arm might possibly be saved, the other was so frightfully shattered that no earthly power could save it.

He frankly avowed his belief that the patient would not survive an amputation; but it was the only chance of saving his life. The deed was done, and Gideon Gillespie was dying.

For a brief space silence reigned after her broken words, but then, with more strength in his tones, Gillespie uttered:

"So be it, then! I'll die white, if I have not always lived so. Call them, Rose—you know whom I mean."

They came speedily; Horace Ward, Drusilla leaning on the arm of the man in whose truth and honor her faith had never been shaken, terribly convincing though the proof seemed to be against him; and the captain of the Water Witch.

Gideon Gillespie gazed from one to another, his eyes resting longest on the face of Drusilla Ward, now sober and quiet, but even the impending presence of death could not entirely drive that look of supreme happiness and content from her lustrous eyes. Gideon Gillespie saw it, and a faint sigh heaved his chest. But only for an instant. He felt a scalding tear drop on his forehead, and his callous heart softened as he glanced up and caught the look of intense woe which filled the face of his wife. Perhaps it was this that caused the dying sinner to soften the truth so it might fall more easily on her, poor woman.

It would be painful to follow his broken sentences; and nearly all that he said has already been shadowed forth in these pages with sufficient distinctness for the reader to trace the different threads to an end.

Enough that he made full confession. He tutored Shaky Joe in his charges against Marcus Dineon, knowing that the young lawyer was to be waylaid and murdered that same night by two other tools of his. He wrote the letter that sent Rose Enright to claim her supposed husband. He it was who concocted the daring scheme by which the Water Witch was captured, and for his share of the plunder, he was to have the fortune of Horace Ward's, and his daughter.

He confessed to the attempted murder of Rose Enright, and of Marcus Dineon.

Slower grew his speech, and more indistinct, despite the stimulants which were given him by the doctor. And then, with one convulsive struggle, his spirit fled.

Long before this, Marcus Dineon had related his strange story, sitting beside Drusilla, her hand in his, her lustrous eyes watching his face as though she could never satisfy her love—a love never more to be concealed!

Naturally, the story was well drawn out, but a brief outline must suffice in this connection.

When Gideon Gillespie buried him over the rail, the bullet which was intended to pierce his brain, simply cut a slight furrow across one temple, partially stunning the lawyer, the burning powder shooting so close to his eyes that he believed them both shot from their sockets; and it was this horrible fancy that drew the cry of agony from his lips.

He sunk to the bottom, and was whirled away by the rapid current for some little distance before he could fight his way to the surface again, ironed as were his hands.

Fortune befriended him. The wild glance which he cast around as he rose, showed him a drifting tree, and, a skillful swimmer, it was comparatively easy for him to reach the support, even with his hands fastened together. Climbing up on the tree, he lay half-fainting. And thus he drifted out of the overflow, and descended the river.

Day dawned, and with it renewed hope, for far below him he caught sight of black smoke floating in the air, and an hour later was swinging a portion of his coat above his head and shouting at the top of his voice to attract the attention of the men aboard the Flora Belle. They saw him, and a yawl was manned, the steamer veering aside to prevent his float being run down. And then, safe aboard, Marcus Dineon hastily told his marvelous story.

Fortunately he was well acquainted with one of the pilots, besides several of the passengers, else he might easily have been set down as one whose brain was unsettled by the watery perils he had escaped after long endurance.

He declared that he could recognize the point where the Water Witch was taken into the overflow, and it was decided to make up a strong force, composed for the most part of the passengers, all armed, and attempt the rescue of the stolen steamer and its human freight.

And so it all came about!

With a great sigh of relief, Marcus Dineon recognized the mouth of the one-time creek, where he had so nearly looked his last on this world, and the Flora Belle was turned from the river into the overflow. She followed the creek for a mile or so, then came to a halt, tying up, while the armed volunteers entered the boats and pulled briskly away on their mission.

Thanks to the cunning scheme of Devil's Dick to secure all of the rich plunder for himself, this was easily accomplished after the stolen steamer was once discovered. The pilots, who were among the party, knew that as yet there was not water enough in the overflow to float the Water Witch should she leave the channel of the creek proper; and by means of sounding, they progressed rapidly.

They stole silently upon the vessel in the gray of dawn, to find its crew of Fresh-water Sharks buried in a drugged and drunken sleep. Not a shot was fired, nor a blow struck in securing complete possession of the vessel.

All were joyous, save Marcus Dineon. He discovered the absence of his loved one, her parents, and Gideon Gillespie. In vain he questioned the passengers, the prisoners, such of whom, at least, as he could restore to consciousness, and he was half-distracted with grief and apprehension for her who was dearer

far to him than all the world besides, when an eager voice announced the approach of two boats, one containing women.

A single glance showed him that his loved one was returning, and then the ambushade was formed which resulted in the death of Devil's Dick and his chosen comrades.

"Fore de good Lawd! folkses, gimme drink ob whisky or somefing hot fo' mix wid de muddy water dis ole niggah done p'izenen hese'f wid fo' de las' six munfs!"

With a yell of horror Yellow Jack Tandy turned to flee from the dripping apparition which so suddenly popped its head above the deck-railing, but with natural clumsiness, frightened by superstitious dread, he fell headlong, kicking desperately as he yelled out his fright.

With a chuckling groan, a wet weight alighted across his broad back, and he felt the shape of a cross being marked out between his shoulders. Then a sepulchral voice uttered:

"You my meat, yalla boy! I wuk de rabbit-foot on you!"

"Mokey Horner, by all that's righteous!"

"Des is, Marse Marcus!" and the incubus leaped off from the shivering yellow boy—"What dey is lef' ob him!"

Yellow Jack Tandy cautiously turned his head and took a keen look at the damp figure that was grinning so broadly as Marcus Dineon shook his hands warmly, saying:

"You glorious old fellow! Miss Ward told me how gallantly you came to her aid, and I was just going out in search of you, to revive or give your body Christian burial, if we were so unfortunate as to find you dead."

Then it was no ghost—no unholy apparition! And so deciding, Yellow Jack Tandy leaped to his feet, snatched up a deck swab which lay near, swinging it over his head as he cried:

"Fore de good Lawd, niggah, I gwine mash you' mouf!"

But Mokey Horner simply raised his hand, clapping the potent rabbit-foot, and cried:

"Look out, yalla boy! I done wuk de rabbit-foot on you!"

Then, as Tandy dropped his weapon, the hoodoo 'coon caught him by the shoulders and waltzed him around the deck, the grinning roustabouts looking on and joining in with the chorus to the wild song which Mokey Horner chanted.

There is no necessity for taking up more time and space, for this, our story of life on the Great Mississippi, is done.

While steam was being gotten up, and preparations made for sparring the Water Witch off from the muddy shoal, Mokey Horner briefly detailed his adventures.

Faithful Yellow Jack Tandy, taking advantage of the hanging of Shaky Joe, cut the bonds which vindictive Purty Paddy and his fellow rough, Teddy Huke, had put upon the Boss Roustabout. Mokey had barely time to supple his stiffened limbs when he heard his enemies returning for him. He caught up the heavy iron bar, and when Purty Paddy bent over him with his unmanly taunts, he sprang up and dealt those terrible blows, then dove overboard. Not aimlessly, for he knew that search would be made for him by the friends of the dead men, and when he came to the surface, it was in one of the huge paddle-wheels. There he managed to hide, until the Water Witch was again moved on, when he hid behind, clinging to the rudder-chains.

He was there when Gideon Gillespie took off the Ward family, and knowing him to be one of the chief conspirators, knowing that his loved Marse Marcus idolized the girl, he dropped into the water and followed the boat through its windings, seeming to scent the trail when he lost sight of the skiff. How he made his appearance on the island, has already been detailed.

The shot that was fired as Devil's Dick tore Gideon Gillespie from his hands, stunned him, glancing from his tough skull, leaving him senseless for a full hour after. Then, feeling that he must get out of the overflow or perish, he caught a floating log, and the current soon carried him within sight of the Water Witch. A few minutes reconnoitering convinced him that the reign of the Fresh-water Sharks had ended, and he swam silently to the steamer, to surprise and scare Yellow Jack Tandy.

The Water Witch was taken back from the overflow, and once more plowed its way up the Mississippi. Its adventures were over for that trip, and in due time St. Louis was reached without further incident of special interest to the general reader. Rose Gillespie went with the Ward family, but she did not remain with them long. She grew paler and weaker, and on the day succeeding the wedding of Marcus Dineon and Drusilla, she closed her eyes forever.

Mrs. Ward gradually recovered her health, and lived long enough to pet and spoil more than one curly-headed grandchild.

And the Mississippi river never more knew the Boss Roustabout. He, and Yellow Jack Tandy, became fixtures in the comfortable establishment of the Dineons.

THE END.

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